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THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

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Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Prisoner's Base
by KATHLEEN NORRIS

The Blue Rajah Diamond
by SAX ROHMER

The Sunken Suitcase
by FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

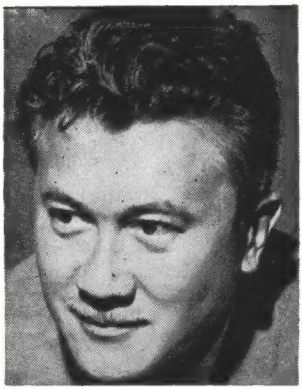
Who's Buying Murder?
by WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

The Well-Meaning Mayor
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

DEATH AT MY ELBOW
A New Short Novel by GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION



SINCE our recent exposure of the double life of Major George Fielding Eliot, remembered by most people as a distinguished military analyst, but secretly a prolific writer of mystery fiction both before and after the last international fracas, we have had a sackful of challenges to print a sample of his work in this vein, as distinct from the true crime story which he wrote for us on that occasion.

So here it is, and under his own name—a brand-new short novel entitled MURDER AT MY ELBOW. Nothing about war in this one, unless you'd rate a private vendetta and the heroic struggle of one desperate guy against a big powerful combination in that category. But we guarantee it to grip you from the first dramatic paragraph, and at the end we think you'll agree that it well deserves its spotlighted position on our cover.

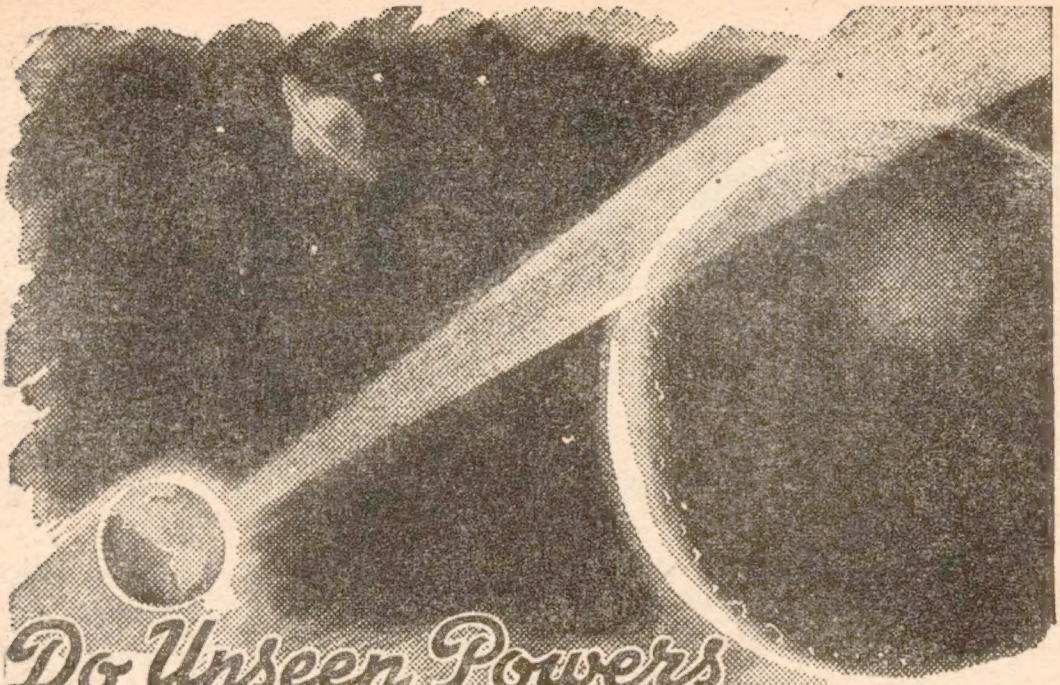
This month also we add another star name to our ever-growing roster of writers better known in other fields, who just had to get into ours. This time it is Kathleen Norris, long-time favorite of women readers of those shiny-paper magazines with more advertisements than reading matter. We expect her to surprise you with the hard-hitting realism of THE PRISONER'S BASE.

THE SUNKEN SUITCASE is another of those Inspector French stories, tracing a web of circumstance that weaves itself around the inoffensive general factotum of a small London hotel, told with Freeman Wills Crofts' flawless attention to police routine. While just to balance the opposite end of the scale, Sax Rohmer's THE BLUE RAJAH DIAMOND brings back our old friend Moris Klaw, who is as fanciful a figure as Inspector French is factual, in some flamboyant shenanigans involving a 300-carat diamond, astral images, ancient evil, and all the trimmings.

One of the most serious accolades a writer of our kind can aspire to is the Mystery Writers' of America "Edgar," a literary relative of the movie industry's Oscar, and William Campbell Gault is one of the select few who has one on his mantelpiece. So we feel a bit chesty about being privileged to top off this issue with a brand new novelet by Mr. WCG, himself. WHO'S BUYING MURDER? is a slam-bang yarn about an ex-prizefighter, with a socko punch—and no pun intended.

THE WELL-MEANING MAYOR, by yours truly, is a candidate for neither Oscars nor Edgars. I just like to be in this kind of company.

Cleve Cheslin



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THE SAINT DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, Vol. 4, No. 6. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 471 Park Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues $3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, N. Y., N. Y.
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the well-meaning mayor

by . . . Leslie Charteris

A criminal who incurs the wrath of Simon Templar is doubly mad when his wicked schemes bring grief to a girl with dancing eyes.

SAM PURDELL never quite knew how he became Mayor. He was a small and portly man with a round blank face and a round blank mind, who had built up a moderately profitable furniture business over the last thirty-five years and acquired in the process a round pudding-faced wife, and a couple of suet dumplings of daughters.

But the inexhaustible zeal for improving the circumstances and morals of the community, that fierce drive of ambition and the twitching of the ears for the ecstatic homage of multitudes whenever he went abroad, that indomitable urge to be a leader of his people from which history's tyrants are born, was not naturally in him.

It is true that at the local reform club, of which he was a prominent member, he had often been stimulated by an appreciative audience and a large highball to lay down his views on the way in which he thought everything on earth ought to be run, but there was nothing outstandingly indicative of a political future in that.

This is a disease which is liable

OUR HAPPY BUCCANEER MAKES A KNAVE WALK THE PLANK IN AN EARLY SAINT CHRONICLE, ROBUST AND DARING

Copyright, 1936, by Leslie Charteris

From THE HAPPY HIGHWAYMAN, published by Doubleday & Co., Inc.

to attack even the most honest and respectable citizens in such circumstances. But the idea that he himself should ever occupy the position in which he might be called upon to put all those beautiful ideas into practice had never entered Sam Purdell's head in those simple early days; and if it had not been for the drive supplied by Al Eisenfeld, it might never have materialized.

"You ought to be in politics, Sam," Al had insisted at the close of one of these perorations several years before.

Sam Purdell considered the suggestion. "No, I wouldn't be clever enough," he said modestly. To tell the truth, he had heard the suggestion before, had repudiated it before and had always wanted to hear it contradicted. Al Eisenfeld obliged him. It was the first time anybody had been so obliging.

This was three years before the columnist of the *Elmford News* was moved to inquire: "How long does our mayor think he can kid reporters and deputations with his celebrated pose of injured innocence? We always thought it was a good act while it lasted; but isn't it time we had a new show?"

It was not the first time that it had been suggested in print that the naive and childlike simplicity which was Sam Purdell's greatest charm was one of the shrewdest fronts for ingenious corruption which any politician had ever tried to put over on a batch of sane electors, but this was the nearest that any commentator had ever dared to come to saying that Sam Purdell was a crook.

It was a suggestion which left Sam a pained and puzzled man. He couldn't understand it. These adopted children of his, these citizens whose weal occupied his mind for twenty-four hours a day, were turning around to bite the hand that fed them. And the unkindest cut of all, the blow which struck at the roots of his faith in human gratitude, was that he had only tried to do his best for the city which had been delivered into his care.

For instance, there was a time when, dragged forth by the energy of one of his rotund daughters, he had climbed laboriously one Sunday afternoon to the top of the range of hills which shelter Elmford on the north. When he had got his wind and started looking around, he realized that from that vantage point there was a view which might have rejoiced the heart of any artist. Sam Purdell was no artist, but he blinked with simple pleasure at the panorama of rolling hills and wooded groves with the river winding between them like the track of a great silver snail; and when he came home again he had a beautiful idea.

"You know, we got one of

the finest views in the state up there on those hills! I never saw it before, and I bet you didn't either. And why? Because there ain't no road goes up there; and when you get to my age it ain't so easy to go scrambling up through those trees and brush."

"So what?" asked Al Eisenfeld, who was even less artistic and certainly more practical.

"So I tell you what we do," said Sam, glowing with the ardor of his enthusiasm almost as much as with the after effects of his unaccustomed exercise. "We build a highway up there so they can drive out in their automobiles week ends and look around comfortably. It makes work for a lot of men, and it don't cost too much; and everybody in Elmford can get a lot of free pleasure out of it. Why, we might even get folks coming from all over the country to look at our view."

He elaborated this inspiration with spluttering eagerness and before he had been talking for more than a quarter of an hour he had a convert.

"Sure, this is a great idea, Sam," agreed Mr. Eisenfeld warmly. "You leave it to me. Why, I know—we'll call it the Purdell Highway . . ."

The Purdell Highway duly came into being at a cost of four million dollars. Al Eisenfeld saw to it. In the process of pushing Sam Purdell up the political tree he had engineered himself into the strategic post of Chairman of the Board of Aldermen, a position which gave him an interfering interest in practically all the activities of the city.

The fact that the cost was about twice as much as the original estimate was due to the unforeseen obstinacy of the owner of the land involved, who held out for about four times the price which it was worth. There were rumors that someone in the administration had acquired the territory under another name shortly before the deal was proposed, and had sold it to the city at his own price—rumors which shocked Sam Purdell to the core of his sensitive soul.

"Do you hear what they say, Al?" he complained, as soon as these slanderous stories reached his ears. "They say I made one hundred thousand dollars graft out of the Purdell Highway! Now, why the hell should they say that?"

"You don't have to worry about what a few rats are saying, Sam," replied Mr. Eisenfeld soothingly. "They're only jealous because you're so popular with the city. Hell, there are political wranglers who'd tell stories about the Archangel Gabriel himself if he was Mayor, just to try and discredit the administration so they could shove their own crooked party in. I'll look into it."

Mr. Eisenfeld's looking into

it did not stop the same rumors circulating about the Purdell Bridge, which spanned the river from the southern end of the town and linked it with the State Highway, eliminating a detour of about twenty miles. What project, Sam Purdell asked, could he possibly have put forward that was more obviously designed for the convenience and prosperity of Elmford?

But there were whispers that the Bennsville Steel Company, which had obtained the contract for the bridge, had paid somebody fifty thousand dollars to see that their bid was accepted. A bid which was exactly fifty percent higher than the one put in by their rivals.

"Do you know anything about somebody taking fifty thousand dollars to put this bid through?" demanded Sam Purdell wrathfully, when he heard about it; and Mr. Eisenfeld was shocked.

"That's a wicked idea, Sam," he protested. "Everyone knows this is the straightest administration Elmford ever had. Why, if I thought anybody was taking graft, I'd throw him out of the City Hall with my own hands."

There were similar cases, each of which brought Sam a little nearer to the brink of bitter disillusion. Sometimes he said that it was only the unshaken loyalty of his family which stopped him from resigning his thankless labors and leaving Elmford to wallow in its own ungrateful slime. But most of all it was the loyalty and encouragement of Mr. Eisenfeld. Mr. Eisenfeld was a suave sleek man with none of Sam Purdell's rubicund and open-faced geniality, but he had a cheerful courage in such trying moments which was always ready to renew Sam Purdell's faith in human nature.

This cheerful courage shone with its old unfailing luminosity when Sam Purdell thrust the offending copy of the *Elmford News* which we have already referred to under Mr. Eisenfeld's aggrieved and incredulous eyes.

"I'll show you what you do about that sort of writing, Sam," said Mr. Eisenfeld magnificently. "You just take it like this—" He was going on to say that you tore it up, scattering the libellous fragments disdainfully to the four winds; but as he started to perform this heroic gesture his eye was arrested by the next paragraph in the same column, and he hesitated.

"Well, how do you take it?" asked the mayor peevishly.

Mr. Eisenfeld said nothing for a second and the mayor looked over his shoulder to see what he was reading. "Oh, that!" he said irritably. "I don't know what that means. Do you know what it means, Al?"

"That" was a postscript about which Mr. Purdell had some excuse to be puzzled. *"We hear*

that the Saint is back in this country. People who remember what he did in New York a few years ago might feel like inviting him to take a trip out here. We can promise he would find plenty of material on which to exercise his talents."

"What Saint are they talkin' about?" asked the mayor. "I thought all the Saints was dead."

"This one isn't," said Mr. Eisenfeld; but for the moment the significance of the name continued to elude him. He had an idea that he had heard it before and that it should have meant something definite to him. "I think he was a crook who had a great run in New York a while back. No, I remember it now. Wasn't he a sort of freelance reformer who had some crazy idea he could clean up the city and put everything to right?"

He began to recall further details; and then as his memory improved he closed the subject abruptly. There were incidents among the stories that came filtering back into his recollection which gave him a vague discomfort in the pit of his stomach. It was ridiculous, of course—a cheap journalistic glorification of a common gangster; and yet, for some reason, certain stories which he remembered having read in the newspapers at the time made him feel that he would be happier if the Saint's visit to Elmford remained a theoretical proposition.

"We got lots of other more important things to think about, Sam," he said abruptly, pushing the newspaper into the wastebasket. "Look here—about this monument of yours on the Elmford Riviera . . ."

The Elmford Riviera was the latest and most ambitious public work which the administration had undertaken up to that date. It was to be the crowning achievement in Sam Purdell's long list of benevolences toward his beloved citizens. A whole two miles of the riverbank had been acquired by the city and converted into a pleasure park which the sponsors of the scheme claimed would rival anything of its kind ever attempted.

At one end of it a beautiful casino had been erected where the citizens of Elmford might gorge themselves with food, deafen themselves with three orchestras and dance in tightly wedged ecstasy till their feet gave way. At the other end was to be provided a children's playground, staffed with trained attendants, where the infants of Elmford might be left to bawl their heads off under the most expert and scientific supervision while their elders stopped to enjoy the adult amenities of the place.

Behind the riverside drive, a concession had been arranged for an amusement park in which

the populace could be shaken to pieces on roller coaster, whirled off revolving discs, thrown about in barrels, skittered over the falls and generally enjoy all the other elaborate forms of discomfort which help to make the modern seeker after relaxation so contemptuous of the unimaginative makeshift tortures which less enlightened souls had to get along with in medieval days.

On the bank of the river itself, thousands of tons of sand had been imported to create an artificial beach where droves of holiday-makers could be herded together to blister and steam themselves into blissful imitations of the well-boiled prawn. It was, in fact, to be a place where Elmford might suffer all the horrors of Coney Island without the added torture of getting there.

And in the center of this Elysian esplanade there was to be a monument to the man whose unquenchable devotion to the community had presented it with this last and most delightful blessing. Sam Purdell had been modestly diffident about the monument, but Mr. Eisenfeld had insisted on it.

"You gotta have a monument, Sam," he had said. "The town owes it to you. Why, here you've been working for them all these years; and if you passed on tomorrow," said Mr. Eisenfeld, with his voice quivering at the mere thought of such a calamity, "what would there be to show for all you've done?"

"There's the Purdell Highway," said Sam deprecatingly, "the Purdell Suspension Bridge, the Purdell—"

"That's nothing," said Mr. Eisenfeld largely. "Those are just names. Why, in ten years after you die they won't mean any more than Grant or—or Pocahontas. What you oughta have is a monument of your own. Something with an inscription on it. I'll get the architect to design one."

The monument had duly been designed—a sort of square, tapering tower eighty feet high, crowned by an eagle with outspread wings, on the base of which was to be a great marble plaque on which the beneficence and public-spiritedness of Samuel Purdell would be recorded for all time. It was about the details of the construction of this monument that Mr. Eisenfeld had come to confer with the mayor.

"The thing is, Sam," he explained, "if this monument is gonna last, we gotta make it solid. They got the outside all built up now; but they say if we're gonna do the job properly, we got to fill it up with cement."

"That'll take an awful lot of cement, Al," Sam objected dubiously, casting an eye over the plans; but Mr. Eisenfeld's generosity was not to be balked.

"Well, what if it does? If the

job's worth doin' at all, it's worth doin' properly. If you won't think of yourself, think of the city. Why, if we let this thing stay hollow and after a year or two it began to fall down, think what people from out of town would say?"

"What would they say?" asked Mr. Purdell obtusely.

His adviser shuddered. "They would say this was such a cheap place we couldn't even afford to put up a decent monument for our mayor. You wouldn't like people to say a thing like that about us, would you, Sam?"

The mayor thought it over. "Okay, Al," he said at length. "Okay. But I don't deserve it, really I don't."

Simon Templar would have agreed that the mayor had done nothing to deserve any more elaborate monument than a neat tombstone in some quiet worm cafeteria. But at that moment his knowledge of Elmford's politics was not so complete as it was very shortly to become.

When he saw Molly Provost slip the little automatic out of her bag he thought that the bullet was destined for the mayor; and in theory he approved. He had an engaging callousness about the value of political lives which, if universally shared, would make democracy an enchantingly simple business. But there were two policemen on motorcycles waiting to escort the mayoral car into the city, and the life of a good-looking girl struck him as being a matter for more serious consideration.

He felt that if she were really determined to solve all of Elmford's political problems by shooting the mayor in the duodenum, she should at least be persuaded to do it on some other occasion when she would have a better chance of getting away with it. Wherefore the Saint moved very quickly, so that his lean brown hand closed over hers just at the moment when she touched the trigger and turned the bullet down into the ground.

Neither Sam Purdell nor Al Eisenfeld, who were climbing into the car at that moment, even so much as looked around; and the motorcycle escort mercifully joined with them in instinctively attributing the detonation to the backfire of a passing truck.

It was such a small gun that the Saint's hand easily covered it. He held the gun and her hand together in a viselike grip, smiling as if he were just greeting an old acquaintance, until the wail of the sirens died away.

"Have you got a license to shoot mayors?" he inquired severely.

She had a small pale face which under a skillfully applied layer of cosmetics might have taken on a bright doll-like prettiness; but it was not like that yet. But he had a sudden illumi-

nating vision of her face as it might have been, painted and powdered, with shaved eyebrows and blackened eyelashes, subtly hardened. It was a type which he had seen often enough before, which he could recognize at once. Some of them he had seen happily married, bringing up adoring families; others . . .

For some reason the Saint thought that this girl ought not to be one of those others. Then he felt her arm go limp, and took the gun out of her unresisting hand. He put it away in his pocket.

"Come for a walk," he said.

She shrugged dully. "All right."

He took her arm and led her down the block. Around the corner, out of sight of the mayor's house, he opened the door of the first of a line of parked cars. She got in resignedly. As he let in the clutch and the car slipped away under the pull of a smoothly whispering engine, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed silently.

The Saint let her have it out. He drove on thoughtfully, with a cigarette clipped between his lips, until the taller buildings of the business section rose up around them. In a quiet turning off one of the main streets of the town, he stopped the car outside a small restaurant and opened the door on her side to let her out. She dabbed her eyes and straightened her hat mechanically. As she looked around and realized where they were, she stopped with one foot on the running board.

"What have you brought me here for?" she asked stupidly.

"For lunch," said the Saint calmly. "If you feel like eating. For a drink, if you don't. For a chat, anyhow."

She looked at him with fear and puzzlement still in her eyes. "You needn't do that," she said steadily. "You can take me straight to the police station. We might as well get it over with."

He shook his head. "Do you really want to go to a police station?" he drawled. "I'm not so fond of them myself, and usually they aren't fond of me. Wouldn't you rather have a drink?"

Suddenly she realized that the smile with which he was looking down at her wasn't a bit like the grimly triumphant smile which a detective should have worn. Nor, when she looked more closely, was there anything else about him that quite matched her idea of what a detective would be like.

It grieves the chronicler to record that her first impression was that he was too good-looking. But that was how she saw him. His tanned face was cut in a mould of rather reckless humor which didn't seem to fit in at all with the stodgy and prosaic backgrounds of the law. He was tall,

and he looked strong—her right hand still ached from the steel grip of his fingers—but it was a supple kind of strength that had no connection with mere bulk. Also he wore his clothes with a gay and careless kind of elegance which no sober police chief could have approved. The twinkle in his eyes was wholly friendly.

"Do you mean you didn't arrest me just now?" she asked uncertainly.

"I never arrested anybody in my life," said the Saint cheerfully. "In fact, when they shoot politicians I usually give them medals. Come on in and let's talk."

Over a couple of martinis he explained himself further. "My dear, I think it was an excellent scheme, on general principles. But the execution wasn't so good. When you've had as much experience in bumping people off as I have, you'll realize that it's no time to do it when a couple of cops are parked at the curb a few yards away. I suppose you realize that they would have got you just about ten seconds after you created a vacancy for a new mayor?"

She was still staring at him rather blankly. "I wasn't trying to do anything to the mayor," she said. "It was Al Eisenfeld I was going to shoot, and I wouldn't have cared if they did get me afterwards."

The Saint frowned. "You mean the seedy sort of bird who was with the mayor?"

She nodded. "He's the real boss of the town. The mayor is just a figurehead."

"Other people don't seem to think he's as dumb as he looks," Simon remarked.

"They don't know. There's nothing wrong with Purdell, but Eisenfeld—"

"Maybe you have inside information," said the Saint.

She looked at him over her clenched fists, dry-eyed and defiant. "If there were any justice in the world Al Eisenfeld would be executed."

The Saint raised his eyebrows and she read the thought in his mind and met it with cynical denial.

"Oh no—not in that way. There's no murder charge that anyone could bring against him. You couldn't bring any legal evidence in any court of law that he'd ever done any physical harm to anyone that I ever heard of. But I know that he is a murderer. He killed my father."

And the Saint waited without interruption. The story came tumbling out in a tangle of words that bit into his brain with a burden of meaning that was one of the most profound and illuminating surprises that he had known for some considerable time. It was so easy to talk to him that before long he knew nearly as much as she did herself.

He was such an easy and understanding listener that somehow it never seemed strange to her until afterwards that she had been pouring out so much to a man she had known for less than an hour.

Perhaps it was not such an extraordinary story as such stories go—perhaps many people would have shrugged it away as one of the commonplace tragedies of a hard-boiled world.

"This fellow Schmidt was a pal of Eisenfeld's. So they tried to make Dad lay off him. Dad wouldn't listen to them. He was Police Commissioner before this administration came in and he'd never listened to any politicians in his life. He always said that he went into the force as an honest man, and he was going to stay that way. So when they found they couldn't keep him quiet, they framed him. They made out that he was behind practically every racket in the town. He knew the game too well to be able to kid himself. He was booked to be thrown out of the force in disgrace, and probably sent to jail as well. How could he hope to clear himself?

"The evidence which he had collected against Schmidt was in the District Attorney's office, but when Dad tried to bring that up they said that the safe had been burgled and it was gone. They even turned it around to make it look as if Dad had got rid of the evidence himself—the very thing he had told them he would never agree to do, so—I suppose he took the only way out that he could see. I suppose you'd say he was a coward to do it, but how could you ever know what he must have been suffering?"

"When was this?" asked the Saint quietly.

"Last night. He—shot himself. With his police gun. The shot woke me up. I—found him. I suppose I must have gone mad too. I haven't slept since then. How could I? This morning I made up my mind. I came out to do the only thing that was left. I didn't care what happened to myself after that." She broke off helplessly. "Oh, I must have been crazy! But I couldn't think of anything else. Why should he be able to get away with it? Why should he?" she sobbed.

"Don't worry," said the Saint quietly. "He won't." He spoke with a quiet and matter-of-fact certainty which was more than a mere conventional encouragement. It made her look at him with a perplexity which she had been able to forget while he made her talk to him reawakening in her gaze.

For the first time since they had sat down, it seemed, she was able to remember that she still knew nothing about him; that he was no more than a sympathetic stranger who had loomed up unheralded and unintroduced out

of the fog which had still not completely cleared from her mind.

"Of course you aren't a detective;" she said childishly. "I'd have recognized you if you were; but if you aren't, what are you?"

He smiled. "I'm the guy who gives all the detectives something to work for," he said. "I'm the source of more aches in the heads of the ungodly than I should like to boast about. I am Trouble, Incorporated—President Simon Templar, at your service. They call me the Saint."

"What does that mean?" she asked helplessly.

In the ordinary way Simon Templar, who had no spontaneous modesty bred into his composition, would have felt a slight twinge of disappointment that his reputation had not preceded him even to that out-of-the-way corner of the American continent. But he realized that there was no legitimate reason why she should have reacted more dramatically to the revelation of his identity, and for once he was not excessively discontented to remain unrecognized.

There were practical disadvantages to the indulgence of this human weakness for publicity which, at that particular moment and in that particular town, he was prepared to do without. He shook his head with the same lazy grin that was so extraordinarily comforting and clear-sighted.

"Nothing that you need worry about," he said. "Just write me down as a bloke who never could mind his own business, and give me some more of the inside dope about Al."

"There isn't a lot more to tell you," she said. "I think I've already given you almost everything I know."

"Doesn't anyone else in the town know it?"

"Hardly anybody. There are one or two people who guess how things really are, but if they tried to argue about it they'd only get laughed at. He's clever enough to have everybody believing that he's just Sam Purdell's mouthpiece; but it's the other way around. Sam Purdell really is dumb. He doesn't know what it's all about. He thinks of nothing but his highways and parks and bridges, and he honestly believes that he's only doing the best he can for the city.

"He doesn't get any graft out of it. Al gets all that; and he's clever enough to work it so that everybody thinks he's innocent and Sam Purdell is the really smart guy who's getting all the money out of it—even the Board of Aldermen think so. Dad used to talk to me about all his cases and he found out a lot about Eisenfeld while he was investigating this man Schmidt. He'd have gone after Eisenfeld him-

self next—if he'd been able to keep going. Perhaps Eisenfeld knew it and that made him more vicious."

"He didn't have any evidence against Eisenfeld?"

"Only a little. Hardly anything if you're talking about legal evidence, but he knew plenty of things he might have proven if he had been given time. That's how it is, anyway."

The Saint lighted a cigarette and gazed at her thoughtfully through a stream of smoke. "You understood a lot more than I did, Molly," he murmured. "But it's a great idea . . . And the more I think of it, the more I think you must be right."

He let his mind play around with the situation for a moment. Maybe he was too subtle himself, but there was something about that fundamental master stroke of Mr. Eisenfeld's cunning that appealed to his incorrigible sense of the artistry of corruption. To be the power behind the scenes while some lifelike figurehead stood up to receive the rotten eggs was just ordinary astuteness.

But to choose for that figurehead a man who was so honest and stupid that it would take an earthquake to make him realize what was going on, and whose honest stupidity might appear to less simple-minded inquirers as an impudent disguise for double-dyed villainy—that indicated a quality of guile to which Simon Templar raised an appreciative hat. But his admiration of Mr. Eisenfeld's ingenuity was purely theoretical.

He made a note of the girl's address. "I'll keep the gun," he said before they parted. "You won't be needing it, and I shouldn't like you to lose your head again when I wasn't around to interfere." His blue eyes held her for a moment with quiet confidence. "Al Eisenfeld is going to be dealt with—I promise you that. Right at the moment I can't go into further details."

It was one of his many mysteries that the fantastic promise failed to rouse her to utter incredulity. Afterwards she would be incredulous, after he had fulfilled the promise even more so; but while she listened at that moment there was a spell about him which made all miracles seem possible.

"What can you do?" she asked, in the blind but indescribably inspiring belief that there must be some magic which he could achieve.

"I have my methods," said the Saint. "I stopped off here anyhow because I was interested in the stories I'd heard about this town, and we'll call it lucky that I happened to be out trying to take a look at the mayor when you had your brainstorm. Just do one thing for me. Whatever happens, don't tell a living soul about this lunch. Forget that you

ever met me or heard of me. Let me do the remembering."

Mr. Eisenfeld's memory was less retentive. When he came home a few nights later, he had completely forgotten the fleeting squirm of uneasiness which the reference to the Saint in the *Elmford News* had given him. He had almost as completely forgotten his late Police Commissioner; although when he did remember him, it was with a feeling of pleasant satisfaction that he had been so easily got rid of.

Already he had selected another occupant for that conveniently vacated office, who he was assured would prove more amenable to reason. And that night he was expecting another visitor whose mission would give him an almost equal satisfaction.

The visitor arrived punctually, and was hospitably received with a highball and a cigar. After a brief exchange of cordial commonplaces, the visitor produced a bulging wallet and slid it casually across the table. In the same casual manner Mr. Eisenfeld picked it up, inspected the contents and slipped it into his pocket. After which the two men refilled their glasses and smoked for a while in companionable silence.

"We got the last of that cement delivered yesterday," remarked the visitor, in the same way that he might have bridged a conversational hiatus with some bromidic comment on the weather.

Mr. Eisenfeld nodded. "Yeah, I saw it. They got the monument about one quarter full already—I was by there this afternoon."

Mr. Schmidt gazed vacantly at the ceiling. "Any time you've got any other job like that, we'll still be making good cement," he said, with the same studied casualness. "You know we always like to look after anyone who can put a bit of business our way."

"Sure, I'll remember it," said Mr. Eisenfeld amiably.

Mr. Schmidt fingered his chin. "Too bad about Provost, wasn't it?" he remarked.

"Yeah," agreed Mr. Eisenfeld, "too bad."

Half an hour later he escorted his guest out to his car. The light over the porch had gone out when he returned to the house, and without giving it any serious thought he attributed the failure to a blown fuse or a faulty bulb. He was in too good a humor to be annoyed by it; and he was actually humming complacently to himself as he groped his way up the dark steps.

The light in the hall had gone out as well, and he frowned faintly over the idle deduction that it must have been a fuse. He pushed through the door and turned to close it; and then a hand clamped over his mouth, and something hard and uncongenial pressed into the small of

his back. A gentle voice spoke chillingly in his ear.

"Just one word"—it whispered invitingly—"just one word out of you, Al, and your life is going to be even shorter than I expected."

Mr. Eisenfeld stood still, with his muscles rigid. He was not a physical coward but the grip which held his head pressed back against the body of the unknown man behind him had a firm competence which announced that there were adequate sinews behind it to back up its persuasion in any hand-to-hand struggle.

Also, the object which prodded into the middle of his spine constituted an argument in itself which he was wise enough to understand. The clasp on his mouth relaxed tentatively and slid down to rest lightly on his throat. The same gentle voice breathed again on his right eardrum.

"Let us go out into the great open spaces and look at the night," said the Saint.

Mr. Eisenfeld allowed himself to be conducted back down the walk over which he had just returned. He had very little choice in the matter. The gun of the uninvited guest remained glued to his backbone as if it intended to take root there, and he knew that the fingers which rested so caressingly on his windpipe would have detected the first shout he tried to utter before it could reach his vocal cords. A few yards down the road a car waited with its lights out. They stopped beside it.

"Open the door and get in," said the Saint.

Mr. Eisenfeld obeyed. The gun slipped round from his back to his left side as his escort followed him into the seat behind the wheel. Simon started the engine and reached over to slip the gear lever into first. The headlights were switched on as they moved away from the curb; and Mr. Eisenfeld found his first opportunity to give vent to the emotions that were chasing themselves through his system.

"What the hell's the idea of this?" he demanded violently.

"We're going for a little drive, dear old bird," answered the Saint. "But I promise you won't have to walk home. My intentions are more honorable than anyone like you could easily imagine."

"If you're trying to kidnap me," Eisenfeld blustered, "I'm telling you you can't get away with it. I'll see that you get what's coming to you! Why, you—"

Simon let him make his speech without interruption. The lights of the residential section twinkled steadily past them, and presently even Eisenfeld's flood of outraged eloquence dwindled away before that impenetrable calm.

They drove on over the practically deserted roads—it was after midnight, and there were very few attractions in that area to induce the pious citizens of Elmford to lose their beauty sleep—and presently Mr. Eisenfeld realized that their route would take them past the site of the almost completed Elmford Riviera on the bank of the river above the town.

He was right in his deduction, except for the word "past." As a matter of fact, the car jolted off the main highway onto the unfinished road which led down to Elmford's playground; and exactly in the middle of the two-mile esplanade, under the very shadow of the central monument which Sam Purdell had been so modestly unwilling to accept, it stopped.

"This is as far as we go," said the Saint, and motioned politely to the door.

Mr. Eisenfeld got out. He was sweating a little with perfectly natural fear, and above that there was a growing cloud of mystification through which he was trying to discover some coherent design in the extraordinary series of events which had enveloped him in those last few minutes. He seemed to be caught up in the machinery of some hideous nightmare, in which the horror was intensified by the fact that he could see no reason in the way it moved. If he was indeed the victim of an attempt at kidnapping, he couldn't understand why he should have been brought to a place like that; but just then there was no other explanation that he could see.

The spidery lines of scaffolding on the monument rose up in a futuristic filigree over his head, and at the top of it the shadowy outlines of the chute where the cement was mixed and poured into the hollow mould of stone roosted like a grotesque and angular prehistoric bird.

"Now we'll climb up and look at the view," said the Saint.

Still wondering, Mr. Eisenfeld felt himself steered towards a ladder which ran up one side of the scaffolding. He climbed mechanically, as he was ordered, while a stream of unanswerable questions drummed bewilderingly through his brain.

Once the wild idea came to him to kick downwards at the head of the man who followed him; but when he looked down he saw that the head was several rungs below his feet, keeping a safely measured distance, and when he stopped climbing, the man behind him stopped also.

Eisenfeld went on, up through the dark. He could have shouted then, but he knew that he was a mile or more from the nearest person who might have heard him.

They came out on the plank staging which ran around the

top of the monument. A moment later, as he looked back, he saw the silhouette of his unaccountable kidnapper rising up against the dimly luminous background of stars and reaching the platform to lean lazily against one of the ragged ends of scaffold pole which rose above the narrow catwalk. Behind him, the hollow shaft of the monument was a square void of deep blackness in the surrounding dark.

"This is the end of your journey, Al," said the stranger softly. "But before you go, there are just one or two things I'd like to remind you about. Also, we haven't been properly introduced, which is probably making things rather difficult for you. You had better know me . . . I am the Saint."

Eisenfeld started and almost overbalanced. Where had he heard that name before? Suddenly he remembered, and an uncanny chill crawled over his flesh.

"There are various reasons why it doesn't seem necessary for you to go on living," went on that very gentle and dispassionate voice, "and your ugly face is only one of them. This is a pretty cockeyed world when you take it all around, but people like you don't improve it. Also, I have heard a story from a girl called Molly Provost—her father was Police Commissioner until Tuesday night, I believe."

"She's a liar," gasped Eisenfeld hoarsely. "You're crazy! Listen—"

He would have sworn that the stranger had never touched him except with his gun since they got into the car, but suddenly an electric flashlight spilled a tiny strip of luminance over the boards between them, and in the bright center of the beam he saw the other's hand running through the contents of a wallet which looked somehow familiar. All at once Eisenfeld recognized it and clutched unbelievingly at his pocket. The wallet which his guest had given him an hour ago was gone; and Eisenfeld's heart almost stopped beating.

"What are you doing with that?" he croaked.

"Just seeing how much this installment of graft is worth," answered the Saint calmly. "And it looks exactly like thirty thousand dollars to me. Well, it might have been more, but I suppose it will have to do. I promised Molly that I'd see she was looked after, but I don't see why it shouldn't be at your expense. Part of this is your commission for getting this cenotaph filled with cement, isn't it? . . . It seems very appropriate."

Eisenfeld's throat constricted, and the blood began to pound in his temples. "I'll get you for this," he snarled. "You lousy crook."

"Maybe I am a crook," said the Saint, in a voice that was no

more than a breath of sound in the still night. "But in between times I'm something more. In my simple way I am a kind of justice . . . . Do you know any good reason why you should wait any longer for what you deserve?"

There is a time in every man's life when he knows beyond doubt or common fear that the threads of destiny are running out. It had happened to Al Eisenfeld too suddenly for him to understand —he had no time to look back and count the incredible minutes in which his world had been turned upside down. Perhaps he himself had no clear idea what he was doing, but he knew that he was hearing death in the quiet voice that spoke out of the darkness in front of him. His muscles carried him away without any conscious command from his brain, and he was unaware of the queer growling cry that rattled in his throat.

There was a crash of sound in front of him, as he sprang blindly forward, and a tongue of reddish-orange flame spat out of the darkness almost in his face . . .

Simon Templar steadied himself on one of the scaffold poles and stared down into the square black mould of the monument; but there was nothing that he could see, and the silence was unbroken. After a while his fingers let go the gun, and a couple of seconds later the thud of its burying itself in the wet cement at the bottom of the shaft echoed hollowly back to him.

Presently he climbed up to the chute from which the monument was being filled. He found a great mound of sacks of cement stacked beside it ready for use, and, after a little more search, a hose conveniently arranged to provide water. He was busy for three hours before he decided that he had done enough . . .

"And knowing that these thoughts are beating in all our hearts," boomed the voice of the Distinguished Personage through eight loudspeakers, it will always be my proudest memory that I was deemed worthy of the honor of unveiling this eternal testimonial to the man who has devoted his life to the task of making the people of Elmford proud and happy in their great city—the mayor whom you all know and love so well, Sam Purdell!"

The flag which covered the carved inscription on the base of the Purdell memorial fluttered down. A burst of well-organized cheering volleyed from five thousand throats. The cameraman dashed forward with clicking shutters. The bandmaster raised his baton. The brass and wood winds inflated their lungs. A small urchin close to the platform swallowed a piece of chewing gun, choked, and began to cry . . .

The strains of the "Star-spangled Banner," blasted throbbingly through the afternoon air.

Then, to the accompaniment of a fresh howl of cheering, Sam Purdell stepped to the microphone. He wiped his eyes and swallowed once or twice before he spoke.

"My friends," he said, "this is not a time when I would ask you to listen to a speech. There ain't—isn't anything I can think of worthy of this honor you have done me. I can only repeat the promise which you have all heard me make before—that while I am Mayor of this city there will be only one principle in everything over which I have control: Honesty and a square deal for every man, woman and child in Elmford."

There was more wild applause.

The cheers followed his car as he drove away accompanied by his round perspiring wife and his round perspiring daughters. Mrs. Purdell clutched his hand in a warm-moist grip. "That was such a beautiful speech you made, Sam," she said a little tearfully.

Sam Purdell shook his head. He had one secret sorrow. "I wish Al could have been there," he said.

Among the Contributors to Next Month's SAINT

will be

LESLIE CHARTERIS,
with "The Reluctant Nudist"

BAYNARD KENDRICK,
with "Melody in Death"

MARGERY ALLINGHAM,
with "The Old Man in the Window"

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN,
with "A Gentleman for a Night"

RICHARD SALE,
with "The Ghost of a Dog"

ROBERT ARTHUR,
with "A Present for Christmas"

and many others

death at my elbow

by . . . George Fielding Eliot

Steele was a harsh, unbending man warped by the cruelest of human tragedies. But there was healing in a lone convict's stubborn courage.

AGAIN I stumbled in one of those icy ruts that I couldn't see. Again I went down, feeling the shock of agony in anticipation even before my raw-scraped hands and knees crashed on the frozen gravel. The wind—the damned relentless bitter wind—lashed and tore at my skinny body, as it had been doing all the weary hours I'd been laboring up that mountain road in the darkness.

Rest a little, whispered the tempter. Roll over on your side and rest—just five minutes before you start fighting that wind again. But instinct warned me that if I did, there'd be no fight left in me. And then Stephen Steele would be happy. I struggled to my feet, cursing the name of Stephen Steele in futile gasps of hatred that the wind whipped away into the night.

"Keep going, Frank McInnes," I told myself. "Keep going. Beat Steele — beat Steele—"

I staggered on, desperately exerting my will, making of each

It was at the very dawn of the Atomic Age that George Fielding Eliot achieved his greatest measure of fame, as a military expert with a rare understanding of how battle tactics daringly arrived at shape men and events in totally unpredictable ways. So brilliant was his factual material that it momentarily eclipsed his gifts as a storyteller. But now in this brand new, hard-hitting short crime novel those gifts are once again in the ascendant—and we think you'll agree that Major Eliot's pen has lost none of its dazzling skill.

step an almost ritual performance as I concentrated on staying upright. In the back of my mind, I knew well enough that I'd have to find shelter fairly soon if I ever wanted to see another daybreak—and deny Stephen Steele the pleasure of hearing that the State Highway Patrol had picked up the frozen body of Frank McInnes.

But there was no shelter on this mountainside. It had been two hours since I'd passed the last cabin. As far as I knew, there would be no more houses till I got to Bonnerville, over on the far side of the ridge. If I'd been a woodsman, I might have patched together some kind of a windbreak and built a fire—if I'd had a hatchet, or a Boy Scout knife. But I was city-bred, and I didn't have so much as a penknife. Paroled convicts aren't supposed to have any kind of lethal weapon in their possession.

Deep in my mind I knew I wasn't going to make it to Bonnerville. I wasn't even going to make it to the top of the ridge. But I wouldn't permit that knowledge to dominate my thoughts on a conscious level. I flung it off with a whispered litany: "Keep going—beat Steele. Keep going—beat Steele—"

My foot slipped in another rut and I staggered, throwing out an instinctive hand that jarred against solid stone. A wall? Hope flickered. Realizing that a wall might mean a house — I felt along the rough surface, and came immediately to a square corner.

Back the other way there was —another corner. A stone pillar of some kind—possibly a gate pillar? Yes. There was no mistaking the iron bars that my fingers next encountered. I'd had three years' acquaintance with iron bars—chilled steel bars rather—but I was happy to feel these in my clasp. People didn't build stone pillars and iron gates in the wilderness for nothing. I peered through the bars, trying to see a light, but there was nothing beyond except utter blackness.

I clung to the bars with one hand, while that relentless wind shrieked and tore at me and with the other tried to locate the gate-latch. My fingers were numb. I couldn't seem to find any way to get the gate open. I took off a tattered glove, felt in my pocket for a match, and waited for an instant's respite from the wind. Presently the flame in my cupped hands showed me a quite ordinary latch—and something else as well.

Attached to the gate was a bronze sign which read—with the arrogant simplicity of one who knows that few of his visitors will fail to do proper homage to his name—STEPHEN STEELE.

I remembered then—a scrap of memory from the long-vanished days when I'd been paymaster for one of the fragments of the vast Steele construction empire. Steele had referred more than once, and with pride, to a mountain hunting-lodge which he had built in these parts.

I leaned against that cold iron gate and laughed. Too bad, Steele. You had me—and you've saved me. I'll be sheltered under your roof tonight. You'd see me in hell first—if you knew. But you don't know.

I opened the gate. It creaked loudly as I pushed at it, and instantly fear was back—the sick fear of the man on parole, the man who dares not commit the smallest irregularity lest it send him back to the Big House. I was trespassing. And on Stephen Steele's property. If there was a caretaker—

But I had to choose between a dangerous risk and death in the bitter storm. I went on, the small gravel of the roadway crunching under my feet. Presently a large, angular shape loomed ahead which could only have been the lodge. There was no sign of light anywhere. My groping hand touched a log wall. I felt along it, stumbled over a step, mounted two more and was on some kind of porch. There was an edge of framing on a door—a common paneled door with a metal knob. It was locked, of course.

I pounded on it with freezing knuckles, kept on pounding until I heard the echoes of my banging in the emptiness inside. I waited, but there was no stir, no sound of steps, no sudden flare of light.

I knocked again. The wind screamed around the corner of the house as though protesting my escape from its fury. There was no other sound. No caretaker, then? I was suddenly convinced that nothing stood between me and hope renewed except that door. Could I find a stone and batter it open? Or would it be easier to break a window?

But these were criminal acts—breaking and entering a dwelling by night. I felt over the surface of the door, found the round metal disc of a Yale lock above the doorknob. I hadn't spent three years in the Big House without absorbing a few ideas about how to cope with Yale locks. I felt in my pockets until my fingers located a piece of stiff pasteboard—my time-card, which I'd used for the last time that evening just as Clancy had stopped me at the exit with the bad news. I pushed it into the little crack of the door-stop opposite the lock. There was no nail there, thank God. The card went in quite easily, and encountered the bevel of the latch. I

pushed gently, felt the latch give—it was well-oiled, well-cared for like all Steele's belongings—and the door opened under my hand.

I was inside, out of the wind. I closed the door and leaned against it in the darkness while I listened. Not a sound. After a moment, I turned the latch back, and fastened it open. Now I could say I'd found it that way. Not even Stephen Steele's power could persuade a Torrence County jury of miners and lumbermen to bring in a breaking-and-entering verdict against a man for taking refuge from a storm in an empty, unlocked house. I might be violating parole, but at least I was safe from having a new rap on my record.

I lit another match. There was a light switch beside the door. I flicked it but with no result. Either the current was off, or the wires were down. I recalled that when I'd tried to phone the parole officer from Torrence, I'd been told the storm had put the line out of business. Probably the electric light lines were out too.

I couldn't stop shivering. It was cold even in the house, out of the wind. I lit another match. I seemed to be in a big room. I couldn't see any partition walls as I held the match above my head, but I did see something that looked like masonry. A fireplace? I walked toward it, my clumsy, half-frozen feet banging loudly on the smooth floor. It was a fireplace. A third match showed me logs piled high beside it, and an iron basket full of neatly stacked kindling. There were even some folded newspapers with the kindling—everything ready for the master whenever he might come. That was Steele's way, and woe betide the luckless employee who neglected any detail.

I was chuckling about this while I built up a scientific fire—criss-crossed kindling on the firedogs, three logs spaced just right, side by side, two shorter ones across them on top. I wadded up paper, shoved it under the kindling, and lit it in a couple of places. Flame leaped up, took hold. The kindling was dry as tinder, and so were the logs.

Heat—life-saving heat—came out to caress my shaking body. Some day, maybe, I'd find a safe opportunity to tell Stephen Steele how he'd saved my life this night—damn his vicious mind and heart.

I slid out of my water-heavy mackinaw. Farther down the mountain it had been raining, and then the cold wind had stiffened the garment into an ice-coat. With the aid of the firelight I located a bathroom. There was no hot water, of course—the electric water heater wasn't operating. But I peeled

down to the goose-pimples, took a cold shower, rubbed my body to a glow with a great rough bath-towel monogrammed "S.S."

I found iodine in the medicine chest and slapped it on my lacerated hands, knees and elbows. It stung viciously. I went back to the fire—it was roaring now—and turned and twisted myself before it like a chicken on a spit. I felt wonderful. I didn't bother looking for food. I wasn't hungry—except for sleep.

After a while I arranged chairs on either side of the fireplace, hung up my clothes to dry, put on more logs, pulled a big settee right in front of the fire, and rolled myself in a highly ornamental Navajo blanket. The instant I stretched out I felt sleep's fingers touch my eyelids.

I knew I'd wake just before six. For three years I'd opened my eyes automatically, exactly one minute before the gongs clamored in the cell block. It couldn't be more than seven or eight miles to Bonnerville, and the garage man in Torrence had told me that the branch line way-freight for Lanchester never left Bonnerville before nine o'clock. With renewed strength, I'd certainly make it in three hours: I couldn't miss. I wouldn't miss. Because that way-freight now represented my only hope of reaching Lanchester before the parole office closed at four o'clock. I had to be there by then.

I had to comply with paragraph two of the Parole Instructions, which read: "You will report in person to your parole officer within twenty-four hours of any change in your employment status." Naturally that included getting fired by a hard-pressed boss who was afraid to buck Stephen Steele. With Steele's relentless hand against me, I knew well enough that even such a technical violation of parole as failing to show up within twenty-four hours might send me back to the Big House. Nothing would have pleased Steele more but it was a satisfaction I meant to deny him. No more Big House for Francis Marion McInnes. I'd had the Big House, and from now on, I chose freedom.

Just as I was dropping off, a queer thought popped into my head. Why was the water turned on? It seemed strange they wouldn't worry about pipes freezing. Well, it didn't matter . . .

When I opened my eyes, there was this little kid standing on the rug between me and the fireplace, looking me over. A cute kid in a brass-buttoned blue reefer and a blue cap above his chubby face. Maybe five—six years old.

I blinked. "Hello, kid," I said.

"Hello, man," he came back, friendly as a puppy. "Why don't you go upstairs and go to bed right? Nanny says—"

I sat up suddenly. The lights were on now and some instinct warned me I'd better be getting out—

I heard a gasp. I blinked again—and ducked my naked torso back under the Navajo blanket. A dame was standing at the end of the settee—a tall blonde dame in a tweed coat, looking down at me as though I were so completely unimportant as to be beneath contempt. She was nearly as skinny as I was.

"May I ask who you are and what you are doing in this house?" she inquired.

I clutched the blanket around my neck.

"My name's Frank Marion," I said carefully. "I was hiking over to Bonnerville to catch the way-freight to Lanchester. But I couldn't make it in the storm. So when I found the door unlocked I came in here because if I hadn't I'd have frozen to death."

Her face relaxed a little. "Oh," was all she said. Somewhere a door slammed. Another female voice called:

"Stevie! Stevie! You come right on to bed this minute."

"There's a man here, Nanny!" shouted Stevie. "He's sleeping in Daddy's cowboy blanket!"

"A man!" There was quick panic in the cry. "A man! Oh, Lord save us all. Miss Ellison—"

"It's all right, Nanny!" said the tall girl. "Just a poor fellow who came in to get out of the storm. Fogarty must have left the door unlocked. Come on, Stevie."

"I want to stay here with the man," rebelled Stevie. But the girl grabbed his hand and dragged him off, protesting vigorously as he went.

I lifted myself up, and looked over the back of the settee, just in time to see Stevie delivered to a plumpish elderly female who was standing over by the door. The two of them disappeared, and the girl came back toward the fire. I dropped down. I was sweating. For now I had the picture. Stevie—Daddy's cowboy blanket—

That kid was Stephen Steele's five-year-old son, Stephen junior—the only human being in the world Stephen Steele cared anything about since his young wife had been killed in a hold-up a year before I'd gone to the pen. Fear gripped me, cold as the bitter wind that still howled around the lonely lodge.

It would never do for a paroled convict to be found in the same house with that kid.

I recalled only too well the words Steele had been speaking the last time I'd seen him, two months back, in Doc Ross's office at the prison. Doctor Alex-

ander Ross, the prison physician and a great guy, was Steele's friend, one of his very few real friends. I'd been the Doc's convict clerk. I remembered how Steele had come out of the private office, and turned in the door for a last word, ignoring me as though I'd been a piece of furniture.

"Alex," he'd said, "I'm warning every rat in this prison, and every skulking criminal outside. Let none of them lay a hand on my boy."

The doctor had come to the door, too, his face very grave.

"Stephen," he had said, "I don't think you realize the violence of the hate that's grown up against you within these walls. You're using all your vast political influence to take hope away from these men. You're trying to repeal the parole and probation laws, to elect judges pledged to pronounce heavier sentences, to oppose every appeal for clemency however well justified." Emotion had made him strangely eloquent. "When you take hope from a man, Stephen, you have a desperate lawbreaker, one who thinks only of revenge. You say you're warning the men here. Stephen, I'm warning *you*. The hate you've deliberately fostered can strike at *you*. The threats you've received may turn into bitter reality. Your best hope of avoiding that is to change your attitude before it's too late."

The harsh, bitter lines in Steele's face hadn't relaxed one iota.

"I'll never change, Alex," he'd grated. "A criminal killed my Kate. My hand has been against every criminal from that moment and I'll not change while I have life in my body. As for the threats, I'll say this: If ever I have reason to suspect—if there comes to me the merest breath of suspicion—that any man has any evil design against my boy, I will use every means at my disposal to make sure he never knows another moment of freedom.

"If he is in this prison, he will stay here. If he has been here, he will return and stay here. If he has never been here, he will come here for the rest of his life. If he gets out through stupid clemency, back he'll go. You say I have influence, and you're right. I've built that influence deliberately, for the sole purpose of ridding this State of vicious and evil men. I now propose to use it to preserve the safety of my son. Regardless of any other consideration—including what you might call considerations of right or wrong."

I can tell you the way he'd said that had made my blood run cold. I was within a week of being paroled myself. I had shot one quick look at the guy

I was breaking in as my relief—a lifer called Smiley Kornick because he was always grinning even though he was "doing it all."

The grin had left Smiley's face and he was sweating. So was I. I'd resolved right there that I'd never come within ten miles of Stephen Steele's son if I could help it.

And here I was in a lonely house with the kid, and two dames. What I wanted was to get clear away, storm or no storm, before the man they'd called Fogarty came back—probably with a gun and a suspicious mind.

All this had flashed through my head in frantic review while the tall girl was walking back to the fire. Now I put it into words: "I think I'd better be on my way, sister," I said.

"I'm not your sister," she snapped. "My name's Ellison—Elizabeth Ellison. I'm Stephen Steele's secretary. I think you're right about being on your way. Mr. Steele would be exceedingly displeased if he found you had spent the night in his house uninvited."

"Spent the night," I repeated. "What time is it?"

"Five-thirty," she told me, glancing at her watch. "I have some things to do in the kitchen. That'll give you a chance to get into your clothes."

She went off through a door beyond the fireplace, closing it behind her. A pretty chilly proposition, that girl. I wondered what Steele saw in her. I'd heard her name before. Everything that Steele did was news, and the gossip columns hinted pretty strongly that Elizabeth Ellison had become much more than a secretary to him since the death of his wife.

My clothes were still damp, but I got into them fast. The shoes had been right in front of the fire and were quite dry. I was sure I could make it to Bonnerville now, especially since the wind, from the sound of it, was dying down a little. If I had some hot coffee, I'd be really all right, I told myself. But that was too much to hope for—

The kitchen door opened a crack just as I finished tying the second shoe.

"Ready?" asked the icicle voice.

"Okay," I said. And sniffed. Was that—

It was. Elizabeth Ellison came out of the kitchen carrying a tray. On it was a steaming Silex, two cups and a plate of toast.

"You might move that cocktail table over in front of the fire," she remarked in a tone that indicated that anybody but a moron would have made so obvious a preparation already. I moved the table.

Elizabeth Ellison set the tray down on it, and planted herself

on the settee. I sat down beside her without waiting to be invited. That coffee-smell drew me like a magnet. She poured a cup, and wriggled a hand to tell me it was mine. It was a pretty hand—long and slender. No bright-red nails—just a high polish. Very conservative. In fact, everything about her was conservative, from her neat gray suit to her medium-bobbed blonde hair and the medium-high heels on her alligator shoes.

I sipped the coffee. It was good and strong, the way I liked it, the way you never got it in any prison mess-hall. I munched a piece of toast. She hadn't been stingy with the butter, either. Not a bad babe, after all, this Elizabeth Ellison.

"I'd drive you to Bonnerville in the car," she said, still talking in that chilly-clipped way of hers, "except that I cannot leave Nanny and Stevie alone in the house. Two of Mr. Steele's men were with us in another car. But the stupid fools ran into the ditch a mile out of Bonnerville and I decided to come on without them rather than wait there in the storm while they got their car out. I'm not sure Mr. Steele will approve of that decision, and he most certainly would not approve of my leaving here now."

"That's all right," I said with my mouth full of toast. "I'll make it easy enough, thanks to this snack. You're a good gal, Betty."

"*Don't* call me Betty!" she flashed. "I never allow anyone to call me Betty. My name's Elizabeth."

"Okay, Elizabeth." I was beginning to relax again. At least she hadn't said, "My name's Miss Ellison," this time.

I knew I should bolt that toast, scald my throat with a couple of fast gulps of coffee, and hit the road. But it was warm there by the fire, and if friend Fogarty and his pal were in the ditch they might be quite a while getting out of it.

Elizabeth was talking again. "Where were you coming from, Mr. Marion?"

"Torrence," I told her. "I've got a chance at a job in Lanchester, but I've got to get there before four o'clock tomorrow—I mean this afternoon. I started out from Torrence on the evening bus for Lanchester, but the valley road was washed out. I couldn't get anybody even to try to drive me to Bonnerville. That way-freight looked like my only chance, so like a fool I got pig-headed and tried to hike over the mountain. It's a good thing I ran into Steele's gate-post in the dark. I was just about to fold up."

The cool slate-blue eyes were looking me over with more than a hint of scorn.

"You haven't much physical

stamina, have you?" she remarked. She might have been inspecting a specimen at a museum exhibit of insects.

She was right, of course. A man doesn't build up a lot of stamina in stir—especially when he's doing his time behind a desk in a doctor's office. Doc was always giving me hell about not taking regular exercise during yard periods on Saturday and Sunday. Some of the guys played handball and things like that, but I just loafed. I wished now I'd listened to Doc. I wouldn't have to sit there and take cracks from this babe.

"I've been doing clerical work for quite a while," I muttered.

She sniffed. Okay, Betty, I thought. What do you do but clerical work? But I'll bet you play tennis along with it.

She was pouring me another cup of that wonderful coffee.

I couldn't stay mad at her. What she did was so different from how she talked—even if she was Steele's girl friend.

"Thanks, Bet—Elizabeth," I said.

Her mouth twitched. She was actually trying to smile—or trying not to, I couldn't be sure. Come to look her over close, she wasn't hard on the eyes at all. Fluff her hair up a little and put a snappy dress on her, and she'd be worth taking out to show off. I always did go for skinny dames.

"I hope you get your train—and your job," she said.

She sounded almost friendly. I discovered that I was thinking about making a pass at her. Maybe she got the idea about the same time that I did, because she got up real quick and walked over to the fire. I got up too. She'd switched off some of the lights when she'd shooed Nanny and Stevie upstairs and there was just the firelight now, and the light from the kitchen, and one bulb burning over by the door.

But there was enough light for me to see that some color had come into her pale cheeks. She was exactly as tall as I was.

"I hate to put you out into that wind," she said, speaking rather fast. "But I'm afraid—"

I said, "Thanks for everything, Elizabeth. I'll remember you for quite a while."

She nodded and held out her hand. I took it. Somehow I thought it would be fish-cold, but it wasn't. It was warm—and it didn't try to get away. Neither did her lips when I leaned forward and kissed them. They were warm too. And they kissed me back.

"Good-bye, Frank. And good luck," she said, moving away from me.

That was all. No grab, no long embrace. Just a kiss over clasped hands. But it was a kiss I wasn't going to forget.

The slate-blue eyes were wide open as they stared at me, and I got the idea Elizabeth Ellison couldn't quite believe she'd done what she'd done. She wasn't the kind of girl many guys would make a pass at. There was too much ice to chip away first. There was a woman underneath the ice, though. I was glad I'd chipped.

I picked up my mackinaw.

Something fell out of the side pocket. It was my time card, the one I'd used to open the door. I'd stuck it into the pocket hastily, and I hadn't got it all the way in. Now it lay there with the firelight shining on it, and my name at the top in big black block letters that could be read ten yards away: McINNES.

I stooped, picked up the card, put it into the inside pocket of the mackinaw. I didn't say anything, but I could tell from her face that she hadn't missed it. The mask was on again.

Coolly she said: "You'd better finish your coffee. I'll just see that Nanny and Stevie are all right, and then I'll be right back to let you out."

She walked away toward the foot of the stairs, her heels clicking smartly on the floor. Get out, McInnes! Get going! Now! warned an inner voice.

But I closed my mind to it. I picked up the coffee cup instead and took another drag at it. I could hear her ascending the stairs. Not fast—but not slow either. I heard her heels go tapping across the upper floor. They stopped. Now they were coming back to the stairs. Down she came and walked toward me. There was a funny look on her face as she came within the circle of the firelight. Five feet from me she halted and stood motionless.

I didn't see the gun until then. Didn't see it until it was pointing at my belly.

"Keep your hands where I can see them, Frank McInnes," she said, the icicles in her voice again. "You'll stand right where you are until the men come to take you in charge. If you make one wrong move I'll shoot."

She sounded as though she meant it.

"What's the idea?" I asked.

I got told what the idea was.

"You're a paroled convict named Frank McInnes," said the icicle-voice. "You were convicted three years ago for stealing money from Mr. Steele. You were sentenced to prison for one to ten years. Last month you were paroled — against Mr. Steele's vigorous opposition. You went to work for the Clancy Lumber Company in Torrence, under arrangements made by the Parole Board.

"Meanwhile Mr. Steele has had increasing reason to be anxious about the safety of his son. Very urgent and frighten-

ing reason. He decided to send the boy here to this lodge for a time, to keep him carefully guarded. I don't know how you found that out, McInnes. But I do know that I found you lurking here waiting your chance. Until I saw your name on that card, I'd never really believed that any man could sink so low as to seek revenge on a little boy. I hope Mr. Steele will see to it that you're kept in prison the rest of your life."

There were icicles in my guts by this time.

She was just too damn likely to get her wish.

Now I knew why Steele had had me fired from Clancy's. He hadn't wanted me in the neighborhood when he brought the kid up here. He was taking no chances. I didn't need to be told what his reaction would be when he found out I'd been in the house—"lurking," as Elizabeth so nicely put it—when the kid arrived.

"You've got me all wrong, Elizabeth," I told her. "Stop and think. You found me here fast asleep. Is that the way a man would act if he was planning a snatch? Would he lie down and sleep in front of a fire and wait for people to walk in on him? I didn't know the kid or anyone else was coming here tonight. But if I had known, wouldn't I have supposed that there'd be guards with him, knowing Steele as I do? Could I have foreseen your men would be in the ditch?

"Use your head, Elizabeth. You're jamming me up for life, because Steele won't use *his* head. He'll just go off his rocker when you tell him you found me here, under the circumstances. He'll never let up on me."

"You lied to me about your name!" snapped Elizabeth.

"I did not!" I told her. "My name's Francis Marion McInnes. I left off the last part because I was pretty sure you had something to do with Steele—this is his house after all. I thought the name McInnes might be known to you."

"Why not tell the truth if you had no evil intentions?"

"Because I didn't want to be suspected of any evil intentions I didn't have," I retorted.

"You lied about having a job waiting for you in Lanchester," she persisted.

"Yes, I did," I admitted. "Steele had me fired from Clancy's last evening. I have to get to the parole officer in Lanchester and report myself in person within twenty-four hours, according to the rules. I didn't want to tell you that."

"You're still lying," she cried. "Mr. Steele didn't have you fired."

"Ask him," I invited. "Clancy said he did. He said no lumber company could buck Steele Construction and stay in business.

He told me he was sorry, but that was that. For God's sake, Elizabeth, can't you see I'm telling the truth? Do you want to send an innocent man back to prison to finish out a ten-year stretch and God knows what else on top of that?"

I thought her eyes softened for an instant—then her lips set hard and straight.

"Innocent man!" she sneered. "A convict on parole, a thief, a house-breaker!" The Steele philosophy had got into her, but somehow I knew that what really rankled was that kiss. It had been stolen, she was telling herself, under false pretenses.

"I'm taking no chances," she went on. "Not with that child upstairs. Maybe you lost your nerve at the last minute. I don't know, I can't tell. But I can't forget you were here when we arrived with Stevie. You'll have to answer to Mr. Steele as to why you were here. What to do with you is for him to decide."

Perhaps I could have talked her into letting me go if I'd had more time. Perhaps, after all, I could have walked out and she wouldn't have quite been able to bring herself to shoot me. But at that moment tires crunched on gravel outside, heavy feet hammered across the porch and the door slammed open. A big man with a hard Irish face came across the room toward us; another man was in the doorway.

"Anything wrong, Miss Ellison?" rumbled the first fellow, his eyes quickly taking in me and the gun in Elizabeth's hand. He had a gun of his own out from under his trench-coat by the time he'd got to her.

"I found this man in the house when I arrived, Fogarty," Elizabeth told him. "His name's McInnes. He's a paroled convict. I think we'd all better go back to Lanchester with the boy and see what Mr. Steele has to say about him. The telephone's not working, but perhaps we can call Mr. Steele from Bonnersville. You and Tony can take McInnes with you in your car."

"We'll take care of him, never fear, Miss Ellison," growled Fogarty. He looked at me with glittering eyes. "The dirty rat," he added. "It will be many a long year before he gets out of the pen again."

I was inclined to agree with him.

II

I stood before Stephen Steele's big desk like a murderer awaiting a verdict that had already been decided on, and that no plea for clemency could change.

Stephen Steele glared up at me with the eyes of a hanging judge. Cold gray eyes they were, without a spark of mercy or humanity in them—eyes deepset on either side of a great beak of a

nose. The thin lips moved; the harsh grating voice of Stephen Steele pronounced sentence on me.

"I'm going to charge you with an attempt to kidnap my son. I'm going to make that charge stick."

"Then you'll be making a lie stick, Steele," I told him.

He'd already heard my story. He wasn't going to believe it. He wasn't going to let himself believe it. He was afraid—afraid for his kid. I remembered what Elizabeth Ellison had said. "Mr. Steele has had increasing reasons to be anxious about the safety of his son. Very urgent and frightening reasons." Now I was in it. Now his fear had fastened itself on me.

My only chance was to find out what was behind that fear, convince Steele I'd had nothing to do with whatever it might be. Otherwise—

"Lie or no lie," Stephen Steele was saying, "you were in my lodge when the boy was brought there. That's all I need to know. It places you within the circle of suspicion. I'm taking no chances with you—or any man on whom that suspicion falls."

"You'll never get a conviction. You have no evidence," I said desperately.

"There will be evidence when the time comes," Steele rasped.

I couldn't mistake his meaning. He meant there'd be evidence if he had to manufacture it—or buy it. I shivered.

He could do it too. He swung a lot of political weight in the State. The paid staff of his Citizen's Committee was almost a private detective force—men like Fogarty, carrying badges as special agents of the State Criminal Investigation Department, or as deputy sheriffs. At Steele's word, they'd start digging—and they'd know what the boss wanted them to find. They'd find it. One way or another.

"All right, Fogarty," said Steele. "Hold this man in the outside office till the police come." He reached for the telephone.

Fogarty came forward from his post by the door. It was typical of Steele—part and parcel of his arrogance—to look me over first, try me and sentence me himself, before he sent for the cops.

"Come on, you," ordered Fogarty.

"For God's sake, Steele, stop and think a minute!" I was begging now. But it was my life—all of it—I was begging for. "Stop and think!" I implored. "How could I possibly know you intended to send Stevie to the lodge last night?"

As I said that, the door behind the desk opened. Elizabeth Ellison came through it, closed it softly behind her.

Steele made an impatient gesture.

"How do I know what leaks there may be in my organization?" he rasped. "I know there's a plot against me—a plot formed and festering right now inside the walls of the State prison. I know that every man who comes out of that prison is my enemy: banded together to seek vengeance on me through my innocent boy. You're one of them.

"Some other, here in Lanchester, got wind of my intention about Stevie. How he did it is for the police to discover. Because you were in Torrence, near the lodge, the word was sent to you. That's how you knew. That's why you went to the lodge. That's why I'm having you put out of the way—permanently." He was reaching for the telephone again.

The determined voice of Elizabeth Ellison checked his reaching hand. "You are making a serious mistake, Mr. Steele," she said.

Steele whirled on her. "I don't recall buzzing for you, Miss Ellison," he snapped.

"You left your intercom switch open, so I presumed you wanted me to listen," she told him. "What I have to say is important, Mr. Steele. To you and to McInnes."

She looked at Fogarty. Steele wriggled a thumb. Fogarty turned and went out.

"Well?" Steele asked harshly.

I tried to catch Elizabeth's eye. She had intervened to help me, of that I was suddenly sure. But she was looking at Steele, and only at Steele. "Has it occurred to you, Mr. Steele," she said, "that if you charge McInnes with attempted kidnapping, his conviction will depend on your being able to prove that he knew of your intention to have Stevie at the lodge last night?"

"Or on McInnes' inability to prove the contrary," retorted Steele.

"Which," said Elizabeth evenly, "he can do—to the complete satisfaction of any judge or jury."

My heart jumped.

"Indeed?" Steele cocked an incredulous eyebrow.

"Like this," explained Elizabeth. "You formed your intention to send Stevie to the lodge yesterday afternoon at four p.m. in a conversation with me. You would have to testify to that effect if asked on the witness stand, or commit perjury. So would I. Since I have ascertained that there was no telephone service between Lanchester and Torrence after three o'clock yesterday afternoon, it was a physical impossibility for anyone who might have learned of your intention to have informed McInnes of it."

Well, bless your nice warm

ice-encrusted heart, Elizabeth Ellison, thought I. Chew that one over, Steele.

He chewed it over in furious silence for a full minute, turning it round in his mind, looking for a flaw in it and finding none. When he spoke, his words were a tacit admission that he was stopped. For the moment, anyway.

"You seem greatly interested in McInnes' welfare, Miss Ellison."

"Not in the least," denied Elizabeth, even more icily than before. "I don't care a snap of my finger what happens to him. But I am concerned, greatly concerned, that the work you're doing to stamp out crime in this State should not be hampered by your being made a fool of in open court by some whippersnapper of a lawyer trying to churn up a reputation for himself. Ridicule, Mr. Steele, is the most deadly of poisons to a man in your position."

I might have known she wasn't thinking about me. She just didn't want her idol smeared. Onward and upward with Stephen Steele—that was clearly her motto. But she'd saved my bacon in the process.

Or had she? I didn't like the way Steele was looking at me.

"McInnes," said Steele, "I may be doing you an injustice. But I can't get it out of my mind that you were in that lodge when Stevie came there. I can't be at ease while you're at liberty."

"I want nothing to do with your son, now or ever, Steele," I told him. "What I want is to work out my parole and have a chance to build a new life for myself—somewhere far from here. I'm one guy who's convinced crime doesn't pay. I've lived for three years with a couple of thousand walking proofs of that fact. All I ask of you, damn you, is to let me alone."

"I've heard all that before," said Steele. "Your class is all alike—full of protestations until some temptation comes along, or you meet some old pal just out of prison, and then— Well, get out, McInnes. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

It wasn't good enough. The man was still afraid. He'd never let me alone. The next time something happened to worry him, he'd set his hounds on me. Parole rules kept me in the State, and with that limitation on my movements I'd never be safe from Steele's restless anxiety.

"Tell me one thing, Steele," I persisted. "Why are you so convinced that somebody inside the prison is hatching up a scheme to kidnap your kid?"

"What's that to you?" Steele barked. "Now you want to find out how much I know, so you can—"

"I want to find out what the

hell's eating you so I can maybe get you off my neck," I cut in.

He glowered at me. Elizabeth Ellison said: "There is a certain justice in that request, Mr. Steele. Presuming, of course, that McInnes is really trying to straighten out his life. If that is so, he might even be of some help. Who should know better what goes on inside a prison than a man who has recently been inside himself?"

"Do you think I'd trust—" Steele began, then stopped short. His hard eyes shifted to Elizabeth, and back to me. He was snatching at a straw of hope.

"Sit down!" he said. I dropped into a chair.

"Get the file, Miss Ellison," he ordered. She went through the door and was back again almost instantly with a manila folder. Steele opened it, took out a cellophane envelope.

"This is the first item," he informed me, handing it across the desk. Inside the cellophane was a plain sheet of ruled paper—the kind they give you in the Big House to write your weekly letter on. But the message on it wasn't written. It had been put together by pasting printed words and letters that looked as though they'd been cut from the pages of a magazine.

> Mr. Steele—There is a caper hatching here in stir to snatch your boy. I can't name names because if they found out they would kill me. Be on the lookout for cons who get sprung the next few weeks.
>
> Your friend.

The typography looked familiar.

"This," I said, "was done by cutting stuff out of the prison paper—*The Scroll.*"

"Of course," said Steele, impatiently. "We found that out long ago."

On the cellophane was written in red crayon: "Received Jan. 17, E.E." That was nearly six weeks ago—ten days before I'd left the Big House. Steele handed me another cellophane case. It contained the envelope and had been addressed by pasting printed letters, too. It was post-marked at Deer Falls—the prison town—on Jan. 16.

"Any prints?" I inquired.

"None that can be matched with any in the prison file," Steele answered. "So far all the usual things have been done. No answers that mean anything."

I couldn't understand why the threat had Steele so worked up. Being what he was, he must have received dozens of threatening letters. He seemed to be reading my mind.

"There's more," he said.

Exhibit C was a newspaper clipping from the Lanchester *Herald* of January 31. "Felon

Slain in Murder Try at Steele Home," blared the headline. I remembered reading about it, all right, for it had happened the first week I'd been out. The dead man was a freight-car thief called "Sealer" Hentzl, who'd been paroled just two days after me. I'd known him fairly well in the Big House. He was a nervous, excitable character but hardly the type I'd think of as a desperate killer. Yet he'd laid for Steele with a gun, right outside Steele's own door, and had taken a shot at him as he was getting out of his car. One shot. Then the guards had riddled the poor, half-crazed fool.

"I can see why this would be enough to worry you, Steele," I said slowly, thinking as I talked, "but I don't see what it has to do with your boy. Why was Hentzl out to get you? Did you have him sent up?"

"No," Steele replied. "I never heard of the man till I heard him fire that shot. But Stevie was in the house at the time—and I came home an hour earlier than I'd expected. It's clear enough. He was planning something against Stevie. I arrived unexpectedly, he lost his head and started shooting."

"There's something wrong with that picture," I cut in. "Hentzl might shoot if he was cornered, but he'd run if he had the chance—as he appears to have had in this case."

"The police surgeon's examination showed him to have been close to intoxication," Elizabeth Ellison put in.

I shook my head. It didn't add up—except on the theory that Hentzl had decided to try to kill Steele and drank heavily to work up his nerve. And for that there was no apparent motive.

Steele was glaring at me, apparently not liking the skepticism he must have seen in my expression.

"Look at this," he ordered, handing me a typed sheet.

It was on the Parole Commission's letterhead, and it was signed by Maher, the parole officer in Lanchester.

"Dear Mr. Steele," it read. *"Please be informed that as a result of the complaint laid by you against Benjamin Brague, who was paroled from Deer Falls Prison on Feb. 23, I have taken Brague into custody and committed him to the county jail as a parole violator. He will be returned to prison as soon as the Parole Commission has taken the appropriate action in his case."* The letter was dated Feb. 27—why, that was just the day before yesterday.

"What did Brague do?" I inquired.

"He was found hanging around the lobby of this building by Fogarty, who recognized him as a man I'd had arrested and convicted for hijacking a

payroll at one of my camps. He assaulted Fogarty when he saw he was spotted. It took two of the building guards to help Fogarty subdue him. He was brought to my office, and I recognized him as a man I'd twice seen lurking in the vicinity of my home, though at the time I hadn't identified him. I turned him over to the police, who found he was a parole violator and notified Maher."

And you promptly put the heat on Maher to send him back to stir, you ugly son, I thought. Aloud I asked: "Didn't he have any story to account for his actions?"

"Of course," grated Steele. "He claimed he just wanted to speak to me about something. But when I asked him what it was, he looked at me and said, 'Oh, what the hell's the use of talking to you?' A pretty thin tale, even for a stupid scoundrel like Brague. It was obvious he was watching for a chance to get at Stevie."

The man was obsessed with that idea. As I recalled "Buffalo Ben" Brague, he was a stolid lump of a guy—not exactly stupid but no braintrust either—it was impossible for me to imagine him working out a scheme good enough to endanger Steele's well-watched kid. Or even thinking of trying such a thing. A stickup was about the limit of his imaginative powers.

But what, in God's name, had gone on here?

The thing was fantastic. It was unbelievable. Take that warning note. It came from the prison beyond doubt, and it almost certainly had been sent by some con for a reason. There were ways of smuggling mail out of stir. It was done every day. But what reason for a thing like that? Was there a real snatch plot being hatched up inside those gray walls? Common sense was skeptical. Talk, yes. Cons loved to talk about the big jobs they were going to pull off when they got out. And they hated Steele. Nearly all of them hated him—so much so that his anti-crime radio talks weren't allowed to come in on the prison radio any more. When they had been, you could hear the low growl of hate running along the ranges from cell to cell and tier to tier.

So I'd heard plenty of yard-period talk about what this one and that one was going to do to Steele when the time came. Including murder, torture, snatching his kid and other things. But it had all been just talk. Any con smart enough to plan a real snatch would be smart enough to keep it to himself, or within the circle of two or three guys who were in on the deal with him. Capers planned in stir were common enough, but they were rarely broadcast. The victims—and the cops—found out about

them when they came off, not beforehand.

Unless, of course, somebody ratted. Contrary to the legend that there is honor among thieves, many a con was capable of betraying his pals in the hope of bettering his own chances for parole or pardon. But then, if it was a rat, why be so shy and anonymous? And why smuggle mail which was always highly risky. Why not just go straight to the warden? Or to Doc Ross, whom everyone in the prison knew to be a square shooter, and also knew to be Steele's friend?

I realized that I was talking along as my wits fought with the problem; I was trying to make Steele understand how things were inside the walls. I also realized that I wasn't making the slightest impression on his stubbornly prejudiced mind. But Elizabeth Ellison, still standing behind her boss's chair, was listening to me intently.

"You're not telling me anything, McInnes," Steele growled.

I kept on talking as my mind tackled the next part of the problem—Hentzl and Brague, coming out of stir on the heels of that warning to "be on the lookout for cons who get sprung the next few weeks." Hentzl gets himself liquored up and tries to shoot Steele. Brague starts hanging around Steele's home and office, is nabbed, resists arrest and then has no better story than that he wanted to talk to Steele, but has nothing to say when he gets the chance. Why? What possible connection was there between these two characters and a snatch plot—a real snatch plot? What motive lay behind all this?

The three things taken together were beyond coincidence. Somebody was doing something which caused these things to happen. But who, and with what purpose? It was just beyond belief that any serious snatch-schemer would send such emissaries as Hentzl and Brague to do his work for him, with no apparent connection or cooperation between them. Just hate of Steele, then? A worked-up half-mad mind out to get Steele at any cost, filling lesser minds with its own hate and hoping for the best? Possible—but unlikely.

And then I came along. How could I expect Steele—after the warning, after Hentzl, after Brague—to believe that when another paroled convict with every reason to hate him is found in his lodge it can be put down to real honest-to-God coincidence and hard luck? Especially just when his kid had been brought there. I couldn't expect so much. I admitted it. But I had no convincing proof—except that I couldn't have known about Stevie being taken to the lodge that night.

Steele glared at me. The troubled blue eyes of Elizabeth Ellison met mine squarely. In them, for an instant, pity flickered. I realized with something of a shock—and a queer glow of pleasure—that she was beginning to believe me.

But not Steele.

"You're not telling me anything," he said again.

I realized that what he really hoped for was some revelation of names and specific details. His idea was that I *must* be part of a plot, so he was waiting for me to turn up my pals. But I had nothing like that to tell him.

"Come on, McInnes," he insisted. "What's happening goes back to the prison. This foul thing is breeding there. You were part of it. Hentzl's dead and Brague won't talk. But you'll talk. And to better purpose than all this hogwash you've been feeding me."

I agreed with him—in part. Something was certainly cooking in the prison. Something that had sent Hentzl to his death and Brague to this fumbling stupidity that was taking him back inside. It all tied in with that warning note. It had to. I couldn't blame Steele for believing that it all tied in with me, too. From where he sat, I'd believe the same thing—scourged as I'd be by anxiety for the one human being I loved.

But how was I going to prove I was in the clear?

Unless I did, Steele would never let me alone. Sooner or later he'd have me back in the Big House. One way or another, he'd keep me there—long enough to make a finish of my hopes for the future, anyway.

I was still thinking out loud.

Elizabeth Ellison asked: "If you were back in prison, would there be any chance that you might find out what is behind all this?"

They were cold words, coldly spoken. They bit mercilessly into my desperate mind, shocking my thoughts to a dead stop—and then to swift reaction.

If I were back inside—No. Not ever. That I'd sworn to myself when I'd walked out the big door to freedom—as much of freedom as a parolee can know. I wasn't going back. That door would never open to admit me again, with steel on my wrists and despair in my heart. No matter what the cost in care and toil and watchfulness. I was out at last, and I'd stay out.

But now? Now I was going back anyway. I could read that in Steele's merciless eyes. Unless I could convince him that I had nothing to do with this miserable, mixed-up, mad-dog Thing that was menacing his kid—or so he believed beyond the reach of argument. I could never so convince him unless I found out

what the Thing was, and who was behind it. If it came from the prison it must be sought in the prison. *Inside* the prison.

I hadn't spoken my thoughts aloud. But abruptly I began talking.

"I'll make a deal with you, Steele," I said. "I'll go back to stir. I'll go under these conditions—that I don't report to Maher about losing my job, and that I'm found at the bus station tomorrow morning buying a ticket to an out-of-state point. You tip Maher off so I'll be sure to be picked up. It will look like a clear violation of parole—trying to leave the State without permission. My reason for doing it is that you're after me.

"The newspapers will churn up some sympathy for me. But you're inexorable. You demand that I be sent back. You do it publicly. You've already had me fired. Now you want me jailed. Get that in the papers. They read papers in the Big House. They can't hate you any worse than they do. But I'll come back as one whom you've hounded and persecuted, a man who should hate you worse than anybody. So if anyone there is cooking a scheme against you, I'll be a natural to be approached."

Elizabeth Ellison's blue eyes were looking at me steadily now. I couldn't read the expression in them, but they weren't ice-pools.

"Why will you be a natural?" Steele demanded. "You'll be back inside—useless."

"You'd better learn some facts about this parole system you dislike so much, Steele," I told him. "I'll be back for no more than a nominal violation. Not for any fresh criminal offense. I'll be eligible for re-parole at the next quarterly meeting of the Commission. I'll have enough public sympathy to make some difference, too. There are plenty of people in this State who are against your attitude, who are working for decent parole conditions and I'll have their help.

"All I'll need will be a job. Of course, that mightn't do me any good in the end. You'd hound me back again if you wanted to. But if I find out what goes on, if I can show you what's threatening you, and your boy, then you'll lay off me. Right?"

Stephen Steele nodded.

"That's not all," I told him. "If I clear this thing up for you, to your complete satisfaction, then you'll use your influence to get me permission to leave the State. And you'll get me a job—a good job, paymaster or something equivalent, with one of your Latin-American construction outfits. A job where I can make a new start, and get rid of the past. You'll send me to this job in the clear, with no record tagged to me. After that I'm on my own. How about it, Steele?"

Elizabeth's blue eyes seemed to be glowing. Maybe—just maybe—with sympathy.

Steele's eyes were still hard, unyielding. He didn't believe I was speaking in good faith. But Elizabeth Ellison did. She neither moved nor spoke, yet I had the feeling that she was conveying to Steele something of what she thought. They were that close, these two.

I waited. I'd made my play. Now it was up to Steele. If he said Yes, his word was good. That I knew.

He made a short impatient gesture with one hand, as though he were humoring an unreasonable child.

"Agreed," said Stephen Steele.

III

"Fifty-seven three thirty-one," said the corridor guard through the barred door. "Pass to Doc Ross' office."

He was a nice young screw, this Erskine. He'd said he was sorry to see me back as we'd walked along the corridor from the cell-block. But he couldn't take away the bitterness of being a number again.

He handed the slip through the bars to the guard on duty in the big front hall. The latter checked it carefully.

"Okay." Keys jingled, the barred door opened. I walked through it, the heels of my prison brogues harsh on the tiled floor. There were two more locked and guarded doors between me and the outside, and a gun-tower beyond that, vigilant at the main entrance. So all this inside precaution might seem overdone. But in Deer Falls Prison, no locked door was ever opened without proper authority to show for it. Warden Terhune was a rigid disciplinarian with screws and convicts alike.

I followed the front-hall guard along the familiar route to the doctor's office. Doc Ross had an office in the hospital, too, but that was more of a dispensary. His main office was out front, where mothers and wives and friends and possible job-givers could come to see him freely. He spent a lot of time talking with such folks, as well as with prisoners. And helping them as best he could. The law made him a member of the Parole Commission. The rest was heart, and mind, and spirit. He could have had a private practice which would have made him a rich man. He preferred to help those who had no other friend to look to.

Followed by the guard, I turned left from the front hall, then right into a narrow passage. At my right again was a door with a glazed upper panel and a simple legend: *Dr. Ross.* I turned the knob and entered, as I had done every morning

during the long months when I'd been the Doctor's trusty clerk.

The guard said, as dozens of guards had said to me on many a past morning: "Fifty-seven three thirty-one," and handed the pass to Smiley Kornick, the lifer I'd broken in on my job before I left.

Smiley looked at the desk pad, nodded, and said, "Check."

"Okay." The guard went back to his post.

Smiley jerked his head toward the closed door that led to the private office. "Doc's expecting you, Frank," he said. "Be with you in half a sec. How are you, anyway?"

"All right, Smiley," I told him. "Except for being back here —on account of that vicious rat Steele." I was dropping this thought everywhere. With Smiley, it seemed to take. His ruddy face twisted itself into as near a snarl as it could get. His bright blue eyes were hard as marbles.

"Some day, Frank," he predicted, "what that man's doing is going to catch up with him. *But good.*"

The buzzer under his desk whirred. He gave me a half-apologetic glance, got up and went through the door into the private office. Immediately he was back again, nodding to me. I went in.

From their vantage point above the thicket of his sandy whiskers, the alert eyes of Doctor Alexander Ross surveyed me with the compassion natural to the man, but with a question too.

"You're back, Frank," was all he said. It was a statement which demanded an answer.

I closed the door. Even Smiley wasn't to be in on this.

"Is the gadget turned off?" I asked.

Doc felt under the edge of his desk to check the switch, then nodded. He had a recording device rigged to take down conversations when he needed to study them. It was a device he never used as a trap, but in order to go over again and again what the people he dealt with had said, so that he might on due reflection be better able to assist them.

"It's off, Frank," he assured me, leaning his stocky small body back in the creaking old chair he loved. The question still glittered in his eyes. I answered it by telling him the whole story, from the moment Clancy had fired me to the moment Steele had said: "Agreed."

Winding up, I said: "You can call Steele to check if you like, Doc. He's promised to confirm what I've told you. I wouldn't let him tip you in advance because I thought probably you wouldn't go along."

Brief anger flashed under his bushy brows. "You're damn

right I wouldn't have gone along," he snapped. "I'm sick and tired of Stephen Steele using human beings for pawns on the chessboard of his privileged life. I'd have seen to it that you got another job and stayed away from this place. But now that the thing is done, and you're here—you young fool—what can I do to help you?"

"You're my anchor to windward, Doc," I said. "You'll have to admit, something is going on in this place. Three things in a row like this—the warning note—Hentzl—Brague—all starting from here. That's not chance, Doc. I can't add it up so it makes sense, but I've got to find out what's behind it or Steele, being what he is, will never leave me in peace."

"The man will never know peace himself," cut in Doc, "till he stops thinking he's God and seeks peace humbly from the only Source where peace is to be had. But how can you find out what he wants to know? He's been here twice lately. He calls almost every day. He's talked to me. He's talked to Warden Terhune. Terhune's investigated, questioned, probed. No results. Maybe you've got a better chance to get the answers from the inside, Frank. But I doubt it. Just as I doubt whether there is, in fact, any such plot on foot as Steele seems convinced there is."

"There's *something*, Doc," I said. "Stumblebums like Hentzl and Brague don't go in for risking life and liberty just for laughs. Somebody is pulling a caper. I don't know why, but I've got to find out because I've got to get your friend Stephen Steele off my neck if I'm ever to live down the fact that I'm a jailbird. If and when I get anything, I'll send you word. I hope you'll send for me pronto so I can pass it along from here."

I glanced at the two telephones on his desk. One of them, I knew, was a private line which didn't go through the prison switchboard. He nodded.

"Of course," he agreed. "I'll tell young Erskine that he's to let me know at once if you need help. And I'll tell the Warden the story too." He waved away what I'm sure was swift alarm on my face. "No, no—don't worry. Terhune is a hard man, but fair. And he's no admirer of Steele's. He doesn't see the good in the man as I do. There are bowels of compassion deep in Warden Terhune which Stephen Steele would not understand—not now. But he may come to understand them."

I suddenly wanted to ask Doc to tell me something about Elizabeth Ellison—and what she was to Steele. But I buried the impulse and stood up.

"Frank," said Doc Ross, "I hope you'll keep in mind that your real mission may turn out

to be preventing harm coming to a little child. If harm is really threatened."

He held out his hand. I took it. A man to tie to, Doc Ross—a physician and a gentleman.

In the anteroom, Smiley Kornick looked at me with a lot of questions in his eyes. I just said: "I'm going back inside, Smiley," and he picked up the phone and called the front hall.

Smiley was a trusty, as I had once been. He ate on the range-line. Except for helping to spread the word of my bitterness toward Steele, I knew he'd be little help. Nobody talked freely to a trusty. But I was glad he was there, just the same. He owed his job to me, and I might need to cash a check on the bank of his gratitude one of these days if I had to get to Doc in a hurry and my regular approaches didn't work.

That day was Saturday. So after dinner, the weather being crisp but sunny, the men of the Big House went out in the great yard under the loom of the frowning walls. Three hours we had to seek exercise, or talk, or whatever relaxation we could find while the gun-guards watched from their towers. There was a baseball game between Cell-Blocks A and C on the diamond and some fifty hand-ball players on the courts. For the rest, there were a thousand-odd men in gray clothes milling around, mostly keeping on the move because it was too chilly to sit down in any comfort.

A lot of guys came up and spoke to me—some jeeringly, and some with bitter curiosity, and a few with honest sympathy. To all I told the same story—the story of Stephen Steele and his relentless persecution, and of my hate. I found that most of them knew it already, via the newspapers, or the prison grapevine which is ever busy with such tales.

I found, too, that it wasn't necessary for me to drum up a false show of bitterness. There was plenty of the genuine article within me. Here I was back again in gray, with a number on my shirt pocket and a man with a gun watching me. Back in the Big House, which I'd sworn would see Frank McInnes no more.

And it was because of Stephen Steele that I was here. It was because of Stephen Steele that I might, for all I knew, stay here to work out the rest of my one-to-ten, less good time, if things went wrong and the Parole Commission took a dim view of my next application. Once you're inside, hopes tend to fade into the shadows of despair. Anything can happen to you, and there's nothing much you can do to help yourself. Or so you feel.

A bunch of guys were coming toward me, walking along the

path behind the wooden benches fringing the baseball diamond.

"Hi, Frank, ol' pal, ol' pal!" one of them cried loudly.

You'd have thought he was my long-lost brother. I knew him all right. So did a lot of other people, to their cost mostly. His name was Johnny Jobin, and a year ago he'd been king of the rackets in Lanchester. But Steele's Citizen's Crime Committee had taken an interest in his affairs and got him sent up for, of all things, bigamy. That was the only rap they could hang on him and make stick. He was a greasy looking guy. Rules or no rules, he managed to get some sort of evil-smelling pomade to plaster on his hair and he had deepset little eyes like shoebuttons.

He grabbed my hand in both of his and shook it heartily. It was like shaking hands with a couple of those rubber sponges you see on the back of the kitchen sink. Cold rubber sponges.

"You and me, Frank—we oughta be buddies now!" he announced for all to hear. "You and me gotta bone to pick with that mismated son of a yellowbelly Steele, hey, guys?"

"Y'betcha! At's right!" chorused the half-dozen Jobin yesmen.

Johnny Jobin was still a big shot inside the walls. He was only doing one to five, and when he got out he'd be back in the rackets—so he was worth cultivating if your ideas ran along those lines. Also he was worth being afraid of. A dozen men or more had died, some of them quite unpleasantly, because Jobin had ordered them slain. Even here in stir, at least one reputed stoolpigeon had been stabbed to death right in this yard because Jobin had put the finger on him.

Not that anything could be proved, of course. Just a crowd of gray figures dissolving and leaving a corpse on the ground with a shiv sticking in it. Nobody'd seen a thing. But everybody knew who'd done the job, and who'd ordered it done. It was Jobin's boast that nobody double-crossed him and lived out the week.

"You won't be here long, Frank," Jobin was gabbling at me heartily. "Neither will I. And when we get outta here we'll teach Steele to mess around with us. Hey, Frank?"

Jobin's shoebutton eyes were watching me with no heartiness in them at all. The guy gave me the creeps. I wanted to ask him where the hell he got that "we" stuff. But I had to consider that Johnny Jobin might very well have some of the answers I'd come here to get. So I said: "We sure will, Johnny," and added a few remarks of my own about Steele's ancestry and character—these, at least, were sincere.

"We'll be havin' a little talk later on, Frank," Jobin promised. He slapped me on the shoulder in the manner of a king bestowing an accolade and went on his way, his mob tagging dutifully at his heels. I was confident any one of them would have cut his own mother's throat if Jobin said so.

I began to think very seriously about Johnny Jobin. I was still thinking about him when Smiley Kornick, looking spruce in his trusty's well-fitted gray uniform, came up to me looking pretty glum—for Smiley.

"I don't like it, Frank," he announced.

"What don't you like?" I demanded.

"You getting thick with Johnny Jobin. He's no good, Frank, not for a guy like you. And he means you no good, either."

I felt my Irish beginning to warm up. Who was Smiley Kornick to be nursemaiding me? He should have known me better.

"I can take care of myself," I said shortly.

Smiley's grin came back. "Sure you can Frank," he said, placatingly. "I know that. Only —Jobin's bad news. I'm going to hang around him a little myself, and try to figure what he's up to. I think maybe he might be setting you up for a fall."

He walked away, leaving me still seething. What I needed like a hole in the head was Smiley Kornick trying to protect me. But I didn't want to get tough with him either. I might need him later on.

I moseyed around, passing the time of day with some more former acquaintances and dropping my I-hate-Stephen-Steele seeds where I hoped they might find fertile soil. I saw Jobin and Smiley with their heads close together. Smiley was obviously getting an earful of some sort. Just then the big whistle on the power-house gave its well-remembered preliminary wail and whooped its everybody-in-for-the-count signal.

The gray figures began swarming up the slope toward the harsh loom of the cell blocks. There were a couple of guards ahead leading the way; the rest of the guards on yard duty were rounding up stragglers, keeping the crowd moving. Here in the middle, where I was walking, there were no guards at all. That was S.O.P.

It happened just that way every Saturday and Sunday afternoon when the weather was good enough to let the men out in the yard. For no reason at all, I suddenly remembered that it was just in this set-up, half-way up the slope near the carpenter shop where it was too far for the wall-guards to see clearly what was going on, that the wretched stoolie had been stab-

bed to death by Jobin's shiv-man.

For the life of me, I couldn't help turning my head to look behind me—why, I'll never know. Two of Jobin's mobsters were right at my heels. Jobin himself was just behind them, the shoebutton eyes fixed on me with an intent expression I did not like at all. A bunch of other cons were closing in and far back down the slope I saw the scared white face of Smiley Kornick. He broke into a half-run when he saw me looking at him.

One of the two mobsters lifted his lip in a wolf-like snarl and lunged at me, hand in jacket pocket. I sidestepped, somebody tripped me and I felt myself falling. I could just about feel a shiv going in between my ribs, too.

Then a guard came out of the carpenter shop—Lord knows what lucky business had taken him there at that hour—and saw the bunch-up.

He roared: "Break it up, you men! Keep moving along!"

He wasn't ten feet away. The mobsters put on an air of innocence and walked coolly past me without turning a hair. Jobin passed me too, just as I recovered my balance. He never even looked at me. But from the corner of his mouth there came two threatening words, "Tomorrow, rat."

Smiley Kornick reached me a moment later. "Frank!" He gripped my arm, one eye on the guard. "You all right?"

"Sure," I told him. But I was not. I was shaking all over. I'd looked Death in the face just five seconds since.

"Jobin's got it in for you, Frank," whispered Smiley. "I couldn't get to you in time. He's out to kill you." As he spoke he moved along beside me toward the cell-blocks.

"But why?" I demanded.

"The stir-crazy fool has got it in his head you've been planted back here by Stephen Steele to put a frame on him," Smiley informed me.

His words seemed to explode in my head like a bombshell. I suppose my consternation was written all over my face, because Smiley said: "Better let me tell Doc you want to see him. You can talk to Doc, Frank. He likes you. He can stash you away in the isolation ward for awhile till Jobin cools off. You'll be safe there."

I sure would. Safe—and where I couldn't possibly find out a damn thing.

I shook my head. "Let it alone, Smiley. Don't say a word to Doc," I ordered.

"But—Jobin'll get you. Tomorrow—or if not, then next Saturday. He means it, Frank. I could see it in his face. I told him he was crazy, but he would not listen. When he was talking to you he was just putting on

an act, buttering you up. I knew there was something wrong, right then. Better let me have Doc call you up front." Smiley was babbling with anxiety.

"No," I said as firmly as I knew how. "No, Smiley. Let this thing alone. Let me handle Jobin my own way."

That was all, because we were at the cell block door and others were jamming around us to get inside. There were guards there, too.

I was already regretting the impulse that had made me so big and brave all of a sudden. Because tomorrow's yard period was rushing toward me with lightning speed, and what was I going to do then?

I lay in my cell that night and tried to think of what I was going to do then. I could duck the whole thing, of course. As Smiley had said, Doc would order me to isolation for "medical surveillance." But then I might as well settle down for a good long stay in the Big House.

I couldn't produce any results for Steele in isolation—and no results would, to Steele's mind, be equivalent to a double-cross. He'd move heaven and earth to keep me from getting another parole or from staying outside the walls if I did get one. I'd be right back where I was when he told me to get out of his office and I realized that it wasn't good enough.

But if I went out into the yard tomorrow afternoon, I might be on a slab in the prison morgue before supper time, and that wasn't good enough either.

I began thinking about Johnny Jobin some more. Who had told him I was planted here by Steele to put a frame on him? And why was he so worried about what he called a frame? Was it the natural outcry of his kind when accused of something they have actually done or have in immediate contemplation? What was Jobin up to, anyway? Was he my "master mind," the center of this tangled mess I was trying to unravel? It sure looked that way.

But first, where did he get the information that linked me with Steele? Of course I thought of Smiley Kornick at once. But Smiley was my friend, and he was feeling the daily benefit of Doc's influence. He was doing life as a four-time loser, with no hope of freedom save in continued good conduct for fifteen years.

And besides, Smiley couldn't know. Doc certainly wouldn't have told him. Doc was close-mouthed as a clam about other folks' business. He always had been with me when I worked for him, and would be even more so with a new man in his office. No one knew better than I that

the clerk in the anteroom could not hear a word which was said in Doc's soundproof sanctum.

So I ruled Smiley out. Then how had Jobin got the word? From outside, of course. Probably from a leak in Steele's organization—as Steele had admitted might exist. Jobin had been boss of the rackets in Lanchester. Jobin would resume that throne again before too long. Jobin must, therefore, have plenty of sources of information in Lanchester, men and women ready to serve and please him.

I'd tried to impress on Steele and on Elizabeth Ellison that the agreement between Steele and myself should never be made known by either of them to any other living person, and would be made known by me only to Doc. But in a huge organization like Steele Construction, the force of routine is tremendous. Maybe Elizabeth had decided she had to make some notes, or maybe Steele had jotted down a private memorandum. Maybe—oh, maybe anything. But Jobin was well served and somebody had got word to him somehow.

It certainly looked as though Jobin might be the man I was after. Especially because he was so savagely ready to rub me out, which meant he had something to be scared of.

So, wriggling to a more comfortable position on my straw pallet, I came back to my immediate problem—how to live through tomorrow afternoon. More, how to survive Jobin's murderous intentions and at the same time put myself in a position to learn more about his other intentions. That was the real problem.

Going to Doc was no good. Going to the Warden would be worse. What could I prove without setting up Smiley Kornick as a stoolpigeon? Even if I did that, and Smiley came through, what could Smiley prove? It would be his word against Jobin's whole mob, and well I knew that no ordinary search would ever catch one of those birds with a shiv on him.

After which the Warden would have to keep both Smiley and me in isolation as long as Jobin was inside the walls. No. My target was Jobin. He'd tried to soften me up for the kill today by fair words. Maybe I could do the same by him—

And if I failed, then I could see to it that I was never more than arm's length from a guard till I was safely back inside the cell block. I could start up the hill early, right behind the day captain and the other guard who always led the way. Then I'd have a week to think out a new approach.

Jobin was too smart to try any shiv-work in the mess line or at any other time during the carefully supervised routine of week-

days. If his hood was caught in the act, the guy might rat on Jobin to save himself from the chair, to which Steele's Committee would then be only too happy to see Mr. Jobin escorted in person. Jobin wouldn't take a risk like that. He'd wait for the next yard period with the deadly patience of his kind.

So tomorrow I was going to risk my life—for Stephen Steele. The bitter humor of the thing started me laughing. On the bunk below, my cell-mate stirred in his sleep and muttered: "Shut up, can't you?"

I choked off the ill-timed merriment and found myself wondering what Elizabeth Ellison would think of the jam I was in. Maybe I'd get a chance to tell her about it some day—if I lived through tomorrow. But to do that, I had to stop letting my thoughts dwell on Elizabeth Ellison and put them to more profitable use.

I fell asleep thinking what I was going to say to Jobin.

But when the gong clanged, after dinner on Sunday, and the cell-locks clanked open as the guards threw the levers at the ends of the tiers, I was already telling myself what a damned fool I was. I was gambling my life against the chance that I could run a bluff on Johnny Jobin.

As I went out in the long line of cons, filing through the rear corridor toward the yard door, I saw Erskine's friendly young face at the corridor pass-desk and I had to fight hard to keep myself from running to him and begging him to call Doc's house and to tell Doc I was in a jam and needed protection, but quick. Go on, you fool, urged the panic voice in my wriggling intestines. Do that and you'll be alive tonight. Don't do it and you're cold meat.

My stubborn streak took over then and got me past Erskine and out into the afternoon sunshine somehow.

I might as well be cold meat as to be an ex-convict pursued by Stephen Steele's relentless hostility. Better, maybe. But life is sweet, even so, and I wasn't feeling too big and brave inside as I went down the hill past the carpenter shop and saw the gray swarm spreading out over the yard ahead of me.

I wasn't long in spotting Jobin. His mob made him fairly conspicuous and I knew I was safe for the time being, down here in the yard under the alert eyes of the wall-guards. So I walked straight up to him.

"I hear you're giving out that I'm a stoolie for Stephen Steele, Jobin," I said, keeping my voice level.

The shoebutton eyes did not change expression. "So what, rat?" asked Jobin softly.

The mob moved in a little

closer—including the two hoods who'd been on my heels the evening before. Jobin waved them back.

"So you're a sucker," I told him. "I don't know who wants you to think so, but you're grabbing for somebody's bait, Jobin. And I can guess whose. Steele's."

"I'm no sucker," said Jobin. "But you're a rat."

"If I was a rat," I retorted, "after last night, where'd you be now? In the hole, that's where."

He stared at me in lethal silence. One of the mob—not as well indoctrinated as the others—stuck in his two cents' worth.

"Somethin' in that, seems to me."

"Shaddup," snarled Jobin. And to me: "Get lost, rat. For now."

The promise of death was in his voice.

"Okay," I said, looking him straight in the eye. "Go on and do what Steele wants you to do. Then comes the payoff. For you and your hoods. You fool, don't you know a frame when you see one?"

I turned on my heel and walked straight away from that mob of killers. My back itched, but I didn't turn my head this time. I could hear muttering, and Jobin said again: "Shaddup, I tell you. I know what I'm doing."

The interview had not gone at all as I had planned.

Jobin was much too sure of himself. I knew I hadn't planted a single solitary seed of doubt in his mind. And yet—if his information came from some source in Steele's organization, as I figured it must—why wouldn't the possibility that he was being framed *by Steele* be his first and most natural reaction? I'd counted on that reaction with confidence, counted on it swinging Jobin around to the point where he might begin to think of me as an ally. But no—it hadn't worked.

I just couldn't understand what made him so sure of himself.

From that moment right on to the end of the yard period, I saw to it that I was never more than a few yards away from the day captain of guards, who always prowled the yard while the men were out. The minute I'd see him look at his watch and start up the hill to be ready to take the count in the main corridor, I intended to be right behind him.

Meanwhile I had time to do some more thinking. Very few old college chums seemed to have any desire for my society this bright Sunday afternoon. The word was getting around; Jobin had put in on the grapevine, of course, for he needed to have proper insurance against chance observation of what was coming. The killing of a rat was

something that no prisoner ever remembered noticing. But since nobody had ever had reason to label me rat before, Jobin had to take precautions to make sure that I was publicized in my new quality.

Of course, as Jobin knew perfectly well, all I had to do was to walk up to that guard captain and tell him what was cooking: I'd be protected. But nothing would ever be proved against Jobin. The shivs would be ditched the instant I started to talk to the man, and I would publicly have accepted the status of rat. I wouldn't live long after that, outside of isolation; and in isolation I'd be helpless to dig into Jobin's dirty schemes. One way or the other, Jobin was rid of my interference. Or so, I reasoned, he'd be figuring.

As the wintry sun declined toward the top of the west wall, tension began to knot up inside me. I couldn't see Jobin now. He was lost in the milling mob some place. But I knew he'd not be far away when the whistle sounded. I told myself I'd be all right, that he'd never dare turn loose his hoods if I kept close to those screws. But that didn't ease the tightening quiver in my belly. I kept moving around, trying to look unconcerned, one eye on the captain. Must be just about time now—

"Frank!" It was Smiley Kornick, hurrying toward me. There was an edge of excitement in his voice, which he lowered as he went on. "I've been looking all over the yard for you. Something's going on, Frank. Wait till I tell you!"

He was sweating. He kept looking around as though Jobin were after *him*. From the corner of my eye I saw the guard captain look at his watch, then glance expectantly toward the power-house.

"Never mind now—" I began.

The power-house whistle gulped, then whooped its summons.

Smiley grabbed my arm. "Frank! Steele's girl is here. She's with Doc now!"

For an instant that news knocked every other thought out of my stupid head.

"You mean Elizabeth Ellison?" I yapped.

"That's the name. I was in the office cleaning up some work when the call came through the switchboard. I told the operator to put it on Doc's house line. I could hear this Ellison dame saying she was speaking for Mr. Stephen Steele and it was very important. It must have been, for Doc came hurrying over to the office and she arrived right after him—about ten minutes ago. I thought maybe it'd mean something to you, so I came to find you."

I looked Smiley squarely in

the eye. "Why did you think it might mean something to me, Smiley?" I demanded.

"Why—that is—" The question had caught him off balance. He fumbled for an answer, and I suddenly came to and realized that the gray swarm was milling past me, going up hill. The guard captain was way ahead, almost out of sight. Nausea twisted my stomach. I'd missed my chance—my one chance of life.

"Never mind, Smiley," I snapped and started up hill as fast as I could go without actually running. I didn't see Jobin. Or his hoods. But I knew they weren't far away. On I went. Now the carpenter shop was just ahead. No lucky late-prowling guard this time—that was too much to hope for. No guard anywhere near me. Just cons. None of them looked at me directly.

But I could feel their eyes quick-glancing from the corners, I could hear the hiss of whispers. I walked alone amid a sea of gray figures, all plodding up the slope as I was, gray pants, gray jackets, gray caps—gray, gray, gray.

I was half-way past the carpenter shop now. My eyes, searching frantically for anything I could use as a defensive weapon, lit on a piece of board leaning against the side of the shop. I edged toward it. It was better than just a board; it was a hunk of two-by-four.

"Rat!" said Johnny Jobin's voice.

In one leap I had that two-by-four in my hand and my back against the brick wall of the shop. Out of the gray crowd, the forms of Jobin's two hoods achieved identity. I raised my club, two-handed. I'd take one of 'em with me anyhow, even if the other got me afterward. They were closing in—the two shiv men in front, others edging along the wall to take me in flank.

I shifted my feet, poised to charge in and go down fighting. The shivs were out in their dirty paws. Thin blood-hungry blades they were—razor-sharp steel ground down from kitchen knives.

"Get the rat," ordered Jobin, from behind.

"Yeah!" I mocked. "Come on! Do Steele's dirty work for him—and fry for it, you dopes!"

The hoods, shuffling forward, actually hesitated. Maybe my seed of doubt wasn't so hopelessly lost—

"Steele's dirty work!" boomed a heavy voice. "I know who's doin' that. Lemme at the rat—he's my meat. *Mine,* you hear? Get outa my way—"

A square-bodied hulk of a man came plowing through the gray mob like a bull plowing through a cornfield. He flung Jobin from his path, swept the two hoods right and left with

out-flailing arms, and charged at me.

Charged—and pulled up short, roaring: "What the hell—this ain't the guy! This is Frank McInnes!"

It was Buffalo Ben Brague, his brand-new gray shirt marking him as a very late arrival in our midst.

"McInnes the rat!" snarled Jobin. "That's your man, Ben. I heard it all with my own ears!"

Brague whirled on Jobin with astonishing speed for so bulky a man, grabbed the gangster by both shoulders, and shook him as though he were shaking dirt out of a cell-house mop.

"Where'd you hear it?" he demanded. "Where? Tell me—"

"On a record," gasped Jobin, trying to tear loose from those huge hands. "His own voice—"

Brague flung him away, staggering. "Sucker, you been framed!" he rumbled. "Kornick played that record for you, didn't he? Sure. He played one for me, too, the lousy double-crossin' punk. If anybody's doin' dirty work for Steele, it's Smiley Kornick, not McInnes."

Jobin, recovering his balance, snapped: "Break it off. Here come the yard screws. Scram—fast."

The two shiv-men and the rest of the mob, who hadn't dared lift a hand to stem the terrific fury of Buffalo Ben Brague, were only too happy to melt into the tail end of the gray swirl. They were gone. Jobin was gone.

I was left standing there with Buffalo Ben Brague panting beside me—panting with a rage that found no outlet.

Quietly I dropped my two-by-four on the ground, and started moving with the final stragglers toward the cell-block. The guards were whipping up the rear like sheep-dogs. Brague walked beside me, muttering. Smiley Kornick was nowhere in sight.

A thousand questions churned in my head. But I knew better than to ask even one.

I just said: "Thanks, Ben. I'd have had a shiv in me if you hadn't busted up that party."

He didn't seem to have heard me.

"Half a grand," he muttered. "Half a grand to this dame's account in the Bonnerville Bank. Or he sets Steele on me. Steele's a frame artist. That's what he is. Mr. Smiley Kornick won't frame no more cons fer his boss after I git to him."

We were going through the corridor door with the last stragglers from the yard.

The guard, Erskine, spoke my name sharply: "McInnes! Where the hell've you been? Doc's waiting for you."

"I didn't know Doc wanted me, Mr. Erskine."

"Didn't Kornick tell you? Doc

sent him to get you. He went back up front ten minutes ago, said you'd be right along."

"He didn't tell me."

Erskine gave me a sharp, suspicious glance, grabbed the phone on the pass desk and dialed.

No. Kornick hadn't told me. For just one reason. He didn't want me to get out of that yard before Jobin's shiv-boys had their chance at me.

But why?

I heard the phone in Erskine's hand squawk: "Doctor's office. Kornick."

"Erskine said: "Let me speak to Doctor Ross." A pause. "Doc? Erskine here. You still want to see McInnes? Right. He just showed. I'll bring him along. It's count time, so you better clear it with the captain."

Now Smiley Kornick would know that Jobin's boys hadn't cut me down after all. Maybe that wouldn't make Mr. Kornick too happy.

He should have waited to make sure instead of lamming back up front so fast. No—he couldn't do that. Brague might have caught up with him. He must know Brague was back—that was why he was so scared in the yard.

"Come on," Erskine ordered.

I was beginning to get excited. Smiley Kornick was going to have some tall explaining to do presently. Not only why he hadn't told me Doc wanted me, but what made him think I might be interested in news of Elizabeth Ellison or Stephen Steele, and what kind of records he'd been playing for Jobin and Brague, and how this all tied in with Steele again.

The conviction grew on me as I walked along the corridor amid the dismal banging of cell doors from the tiers on either hand, that if Kornick could be confronted with Brague now, before Brague had time to cool off and get clammy, we might get most of the story right off the bat.

Then a separate and special excitement took over. Was I going to see Elizabeth Ellison again—or had Smiley been lying about her being there? Was it because she'd asked to see me that Doc had sent for me?

"Take it easy," said Erskine. "You don't have to run."

We had to stop at the guard captain's dingy little office to clear me on the count and get a special after-count pass. The captain didn't like it. He grouched and grumbled about Doc Ross not caring a damn about the routine of the prison or anything else except coddling cons. He was so miffed he broke his pencil-point stabbing it at the pass and spent a couple of minutes fumbling in his desk drawer looking for another pencil that would write.

I was pretty nearly dancing with impatience by the time we got going again. I had a feeling I was close, very close, to the answers I wanted—the answers that would clear up the whole mess and send me on my way to a future with some hope in it.

Maybe even tonight. Maybe with Elizabeth right there to hear.

"Fifty-seven three thirty-one. Special pass to see Doc Ross."

We were at that barred door that led to the front hall, and Erskine was handing the pass through the bars to the front-hall guard, a fat guy with a walrus mustache.

The hall-guard laughed. "You're too late, Ersk," he said. "Doc just went out the front door with a dame, not two minutes ago."

Quick alarm clamored inside my skull. This was all wrong.

"You sure, Gorman?" Erskine asked. "I was just talking to Doc on the phone, and he said he wanted to see this man right away. He cleared it with the captain himself." I could tell from Erskine's tone that he, too, felt something was wrong.

Gorman turned around, and yelled down the hall to the guard on duty at the front door—or rather, doors. There were two, an inner one of steel bars and an outer one of oak. The guard was stationed in the vestibule between them and he was supposed to see that both were never open at the same time.

"Hey, Mike," yelled Gorman, "didn't I just see you let Doc Ross and a lady out?"

"Sure did," Mike yelled back.

"Guess Doc changed his mind," shrugged Gorman.

"It's not like him," muttered Erskine. "There's something damn funny about this."

"Maybe he left a message with Kornick, Mr. Erskine," I suggested desperately.

Erskine grabbed at that one. "Yeah. That trusty of Doc's still in the office, Gorman?"

"Sure is," said Gorman. "Doc told me he was keepin' him out after count. Come on through if you want to ask him about Doc maybe comin' back. That's prob'ly the answer." He was opening the door with a great rattle of keys as he spoke.

I wanted to run the rest of the way. Erskine walked pretty fast himself, with me ahead of him.

The door into Doc's anteroom was closed. I turned the knob, pushed. The place was empty. The gray light of fading day shone through the wide open door that led to Doc's private sanctum. Two strides and I was in that doorway.

Face down on the floor of his office lay the body of Doctor Alexander Ross, blood oozing from his head and spreading in

an ominous dark stain on the threadbare rug.

A startled oath ripped from Erskine's throat.

I was on my knees beside Doc, my hand on one outflung wrist. I was so frantic that I couldn't feel the pulse at first. Then—there it was—weak, but steady.

Thankfulness surged up in my heart.

"He's not dead," I heard myself saying to Erskine, like somebody talking a long way off. "He's not dead. Help me lift him on to that couch."

Erskine yelled: "Gorman! Get the warden—fast!" Then he came to help me, his immediate duty done.

All I could think of was Doc. He was breathing in funny spasmodic jerks—concussion, maybe. We got him on the leather sofa, and propped his head up with a cushion. I clawed into Doc's first-aid cabinet, got out gauze and tape, turned on hot water in the lavatory. Doc mustn't die, Doc mustn't die, I kept repeating wildly to myself. The cut on his head wasn't bleeding so much now. I washed it, and taped a gauze pad in place. Doc was getting dividends for having taught me first aid. He was breathing easier already.

A hand grabbed my shoulder, and spun me around.

The bulldog face of Warden Terhune was just an inch from mine.

"What the hell goes on here, McInnes?" the warden demanded.

"Doc's hurt—that's what goes on!" I barked back. "Get on the phone and get a doctor out from town, can't you?"

"That's being done," the warden growled. "Calm down, McInnes, and do some fast talking. Where's Kornick?"

Over his shoulder I could see the oak hatrack in the corner—the hatrack on which Doc always hung the brown felt snapbrim, the brown scarf and the brown topcoat that were his invariable winter uniform. The hooks were empty now.

"I don't know where Kornick is," I told the warden, "but I can make a pretty good guess. I'd guess he went out the front door about ten minutes ago in Doc's hat, scarf and coat." Then I remembered something else. "With Stephen Steele's secretary to keep him company," I added.

"We've got to stop him!" roared the warden, and charged out into the hall again. I could hear him shouting at the luckless front-door guard.

It was easy to figure how Smiley had worked it. One of Terhune's few failings was that he kept guards on the same posts year after year. That front-door job became mere routine after a while. When a guard had become accustomed to seeing that brown hat-scarf-coat combina-

tion—had seen it maybe a thousand times, going in and out—his automatic reaction every time he saw it again was, "Doc Ross, open up." Gray trousers below, yes. But then Doc often wore gray suits—had one on now, in fact. And Smiley, as a trusty, was allowed to wear decent shoes instead of the brogans of the ordinary prisoner.

But how had Smiley induced Elizabeth Ellison to go along quietly? And there was something else. How—

Back came the warden, exclaiming, "The man who went out that door had a beard! Kornick didn't!"

The fact had just occurred to me, too.

"Take a look, Warden."

It was Doc's voice—tremulous but clear enough. The warden grabbed a wisp of brown fibers from Doc's uplifted fingers. They could have been shredded rope, but they also looked like hairs from Doc's well-known soup-strainer mustache.

"Kornick sapped me," Doc was saying. "All I got was—a few hairs from his false beard. Is Miss Ellison all right? She was out in the corridor—"

The warden waited for no more. He was at the phone, ordering the deputy warden to start the escape routine, calling the sheriff and the State Highway Patrol, and sending Erskine on the run to get Kornick's identification data from the files.

Through the window-ventilator came the eerie wail of the prison siren, warning all the Deer Falls countryside that a convict had escaped.

I bent over Doc, asking him what else I could do till the town croaker got there. I was trying hard not to think about Elizabeth Ellison.

"You did all right, Frank," Doc said. "And I'm all right, too. I don't need Doctor Adams. No concussion. Just a knock on the head."

"But how—"

"I had my office door open, waiting for you," Doc told me. "Miss Ellison wanted to see you." My stupid heart flip-flopped— "She went out in the corridor. Then I felt somebody behind me. I started to turn, got one glimpse of Kornick wearing a false beard and grabbed for him. But he was too quick. That's all I know."

I was thinking hard and fast now.

Kornick had been planning this—or he wouldn't have had that phony beard all ready and waiting. But a crash-out didn't fit the rest of what he'd been doing. Or did it? I couldn't think it through. What I did know was that Kornick had to be nabbed, and quick. On Elizabeth's account, and on my own. He was the key to the whole busi-

ness. He was Exhibit A. Without him—alive and talking—I might never be able to satisfy Steele.

I tried to put myself in Kornick's place. Here I am, outside, with the door closing behind me. It's still daylight. I've a girl on my hands—scared now, afraid of whatever I've scared her with, but ready to turn on me the first chance she gets. Where would I go—what would I do?

The warden was still rattling directions into the telephone. He was talking to the State Highway Patrol in the capital now while the guards kept running in and out with reports.

"Did Kornick get your car keys, Doc?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "In my wallet. It's gone."

"Money?"

"Not much. Four or five dollars."

"Is your car outside in the parking lot?"

Another nod.

I had some of the answers. Coming out the door, Kornick would know that the automatic warning light that flashed in the gun-tower whenever the front door was opened would have already caused the guard on tower duty to take a look to see who came out. At that distance, with the evening light just beginning to fade, he'd be Doc to the guard's eye. So he had to act like Doc. The only natural thing was to get into Doc's car and drive off. As though he were Doc going home, Doc's house being only a half-mile down the road. Of course Kornick would have to make Elizabeth go with him—

I was talking as I thought it out. Doc's face was grimmer than I'd ever seen it. "I'm getting up," he announced. "Help me."

I obeyed.

The warden slammed down the phone, spun around in Doc's chair.

"You okay now, Doc?" he asked.

"Kornick's got my car," Doc said. The old familiar crispness was coming back into his voice. "He's kidnapped Miss Ellison in my car. It's my fault. I'm going after him."

The warden said: "Take it easy, Doc. I figured the car because it's missing. I got the license number out on a general alarm already. The sheriff and Highway Patrol are setting up road-blocks. There's nothing you can do—unless maybe you knew exactly where he's heading for."

"I've got an idea where he might be heading for," I said.

Instant suspicion gleamed in the warden's eyes. "You have, have you? So you're in on this."

"Hold it, Warden," cut in Doc. "You know McInnes is in here investigating for Stephen Steele. He's not just an ordinary prisoner. He's as anxious to catch

Kornick as I am—or you. Where do you think Kornick's heading, Frank?"

"Bonnerville's my guess," I said. "I think he's got getaway dough stashed there. I think he's been running some kind of lousy blackmail racket on outgoing cons. I don't quite know how." I told them about Ben Brague, and the "records," and Brague's rambling about "a half grand to this dame's account in the Bonnerville Bank, or he sets Steele on me."

"I'll get the whole story out of Brague, and fast," the warden promised.

"You may not get it too fast, Warden," I warned. "If you could bring Brague and Kornick together you'd stand a better chance. As it is, Brague's liable to clam up, the way he did with Steele."

The warden's jaw tightened.

"Yeah, I know," I said before he could speak. "You can beat it out of him—in time. But he's tough, and right now he hates everybody. It might take you half the night. Have you got time to waste like that?"

"No," said Doc sharply. "Not with Kornick loose with Miss Ellison."

That was how I felt, too.

"All right, bright boys," exclaimed the warden impatiently. "Have you any better suggestions?"

"We can at least try to confirm this Bonnerville hunch of Frank's before we go off half-cocked," Doc pointed out. "Is there anything in Kornick's record that shows any connection with Bonnerville. Has he any relatives there?"

"No," the warden said, gesturing toward the file that Erskine had brought. "Nothing about relatives. He doesn't seem to have any. And not a peep about Bonnerville."

"Can I try an idea?" I asked.

The warden eyed me sourly. Having a con on a manhunt in any other capacity than that of stool-pigeon apparently didn't set well with him. But he grunted nevertheless: "Go ahead."

I picked up the phone—the outside line, since I knew that the prison switchboard would be jammed now. I dialed long distance. "Get me the Bonnerville Bank at Bonnerville," I told the operator.

"They'll be closed," objected the warden. I ignored the interruption, for I was aware of that already.

"Bonnerville," said a female voice in my ear.

"Deer Falls calling the Bonnerville Bank," said my operator.

"The bank's closed—" began the other voice.

I cut in urgently. "Get the cashier at his home. Do you know who he is?"

"Sure," said the Bonnerville

voice, with the cheerful friendliness of a small-town phone-girl. "Mr. Duffield. He lives out on Route Nine. I'll ring him."

Buzz-buzz-buzz went the ringing signal. A party line, obviously. The word would be all over town, but that couldn't be helped.

There was a short wait, and then a man's voice said: "Hello."

"Mr. Duffield?" I asked.

"That's right," came impatiently. "Who are you, sir?"

"My name's McInnes, Mr. Duffield," I said. "I'm speaking for the warden of the State Prison at Deer Falls. We're trying to trace an escaped prisoner."

"Good God!" interrupted Duffield, sounding excited. "Anything I can do?"

"This may sound funny to you, but it's important," I said. Do you have many mail deposits at your bank, Mr. Duffield?"

"Very few," he replied. It was what I'd imagined.

"Any that you can definitely remember in the last month?"

"Yes-s-s. Now I come to think of it, there've been two—no, three—to Mrs. Fitzgerald's account. Mrs. Hedwig K. Fitzgerald."

"In what amounts, if you recall?" I prodded.

"Two for a hundred dollars each, and one for—lemme see—two hundred and fifty, I think."

"Checks?"

"No," he replied promptly. "Cash, sent by registered mail. One of 'em wasn't even registered."

"Is the money still on deposit?"

"Nope. Mrs. Fitzgerald kept calling up, and every time we told her a deposit had come in, she came right down and checked it out. That's why I remember those deposits so clearly."

"Where's Mrs. Fitzgerald live, Mr. Duffield?"

"On High Street, right at the west edge of town."

"One more question, Mr. Duffield. Do you know what that initial K of hers stands for?"

"Yes—I think so," he replied. "She's a widow, and her maiden name is Kendrick or Kellick—something like that."

"Would it be Kornick?"

"Kornick—that's it. Sure."

"Thank you, Mr. Duffield. Would you mind very much if we ask you to keep this conversation to yourself for the time being?"

"Not at all, Mr. McInnes. Not at all. Always glad to oblige the law."

I hung up. The warden, who'd had his ear about an inch from the receiver taking in every word, said: "Nice work, McInnes." He began jiggling the hook on the other phone. "Get me the State Highway Patrol—fast," he ordered.

Brague had been telling the truth. Kornick was building up a bankroll in Bonnerville with some kind of blackmail racket. Getaway dough, of course. What other use does a lifer have for a bank roll? Bonnerville probably looked like a safe spot to Kornick, since he had never mentioned this aunt or sister or whatever she was—until Brague came back inside. It was a possibility he should have foreseen, but apparently hadn't. But what was the "record" angle?

Doc and I looked at each other. I could tell from the way his eyes were squinting that he was doing some hard thinking too. The warden cut loose with a burst of violent profanity and hurled the telephone into its cradle.

"A hell of a mess this is!" he grunted. "There's no peace officer in Bonnerville at all, and the nearest sheriff's office is at Torrence, on the other side of the mountain. Sheriff's gone hunting. State Highway Patrol has only one car anywhere out that way, and they've lost contact with it. Radio trouble. Last they heard, it was moving in toward a road-block position. They say they'll keep trying. Very nice of 'em. But meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," said Doc grimly, "I'm going to Bonnerville myself. Right now. I let that scoundrel get away. I failed to protect a guest. He's my responsibility, warden, and I'm going to get him and bring him in. I want a gun and a car."

The warden got out of his chair, a worried scowl on his face.

"Yeah, Doc. Yeah," he agreed. "We've got to go after Kornick from here, that's for sure. Nobody else to do it. But you, Doc—that rap on the head. Are you sure you're up to it? Me, I've got to stay here and keep things humming, but I could send a couple of the boys."

"No time to explain this whole thing to 'em," cut in Doc. "And without full information they'd mess it up. God knows what we'll find at Bonnerville. Lend me a coat and hat, warden."

We? What did he mean by we?

"Take me with you, Doc!" I burst out. "I've earned the right—"

"I was just going to suggest that," he replied.

"No!" protested the warden. "McInnes is still a prisoner in my book. I've got no authority to turn him loose."

"Yes you have," retorted Doc. "You're ex-officio a member of the Parole Commission. So am I. It takes only three members for a decision in any individual case. McInnes isn't back here for any fresh offense—just for a technical violation of pa-

role. Under the rules he can be reconsidered for parole at any time. I'll guarantee you I'll get a third signature in the morning. But I need McInnes now, Warden. He's worth a dozen men that don't know all the angles. Don't deny me his help because of a technicality."

The corners of the warden's mouth lifted in a grim smile.

"Little technicalities like that make wardens into ex-wardens," he said drily. "I hope you'll be as eloquent in defending me before the Prison Board as you are in getting McInnes out of stir. Okay, take him. But bring him back here afterward till we get those papers fixed up."

"Let's go," said Doc to me.

IV

It was just under an hour from the time we'd roared away from the prison parking-lot when I brought the warden's big car over the last rise and we saw the lights of Bonnerville twinkling in the valley, with the loom of the mountain bulking dark against the sky behind.

Sixty-five miles in less than sixty minutes, the dashboard clock told me. On a narrow, twisting black-top road, that wasn't bad driving. But it wasn't fast enough for me. I could have used a jet plane and not got there fast enough. Radio reports kept coming in as we drove, telling us that Kornick was still on the loose. And he still had Elizabeth Ellison with him. At least she hadn't turned up anywhere.

The only road-block we ran into was one manned by a couple of dopey-looking deputy sheriffs whose sole idea was that they were laying for a black Chevrolet sedan with a man and a girl in it, and the man wore a beard. They didn't even have the license number right. I could think of about ten ways that friend Kornick could have gotten past those characters. We kept hearing the Highway Patrol trying to make contact with "Car 8," without any luck. So it looked more and more as though, if Kornick were out Bonnerville way, we—Doc and I—were pretty much on our own.

Doc had been quite chipper at first. Of course I'd caught him up on the Jobin episodes, and he'd told me that Elizabeth Ellison had been sent to the prison by Steele, who wanted a progress report in two days. Which meant Steele was already jittery about the deal he'd made with me.

The last few miles Doc hadn't said much: once I thought he was asleep. Now I nudged him: "Bonnerville, Doc."

He just grunted, and sat up a little straighter. He looked sort of funny in the warden's raincoat—which fitted him like a

tent—and a cloth cap he'd borrowed from Erskine. Me, I was wearing an old sweater of Doc's to hide my gray prison shirt. My jacket I'd left behind, for otherwise some hick cop seeing prison gray might shoot first and ask my name and address afterward.

I had a badge, too, believe it or not. The warden had appointed me an auxiliary prison guard under an old rule which authorized "trusty" guards at prison farms. The rule was still on the books, though way out of line with present policies. But I had to have something to show for the Smith and Wesson .45 which was belted around my waist, in case any of the road-block people got nosey. The warden said he might as well get kicked out for doing the job right as for half doing it.

There weren't many folks in Bonnerville's badly lighted streets, but I hailed a couple of punks coming out of a beer joint. They told me to turn right at the next corner and then left, and I'd be on High Street going west. Sure, they knew where Mrs. Fitzgerald lived—about six houses from where I made the left turn, on the right hand side of the street. White house on a high bank with a steep driveway leading up to it.

I didn't turn into High Street at all. I passed the corner and parked. Kornick—if he was there—would be watching for strange cars.

Doc and I got out and walked along High Street on the dirt path that did duty for a sidewalk. The sixth house was high up, all right. Anybody turning into that driveway would have to go into second gear and make enough noise to wake the dead. Wooden steps led up to the front door. There were no lights at all, though lights showed in every other house near by.

I didn't like the sound of Doc's breathing. It was getting jerky again, the way it had been when I'd lifted him on to that couch.

"I'll case the joint, Doc," I muttered. "First I've got to see if your car's here. You stick here and cut our boy off if he comes out."

"I'll go with you," said Doc. There was no time to argue, so I went ahead, and Doc followed. We walked softly on the sloping grass on the left of the driveway, trying to keep from sliding down on to the gravel. Above and to the left was the pale bulk of the house with the dark rectangles of its windows.

Not a sound otherwise—except that catch-and-go breathing of Doc's. We moved along beside the house until the garage loomed ahead. The door was open, and it was empty. There was no car behind the house, either. Five would have gotten

you ten Kornick wasn't there, in my book. He'd never dare get too far away from his transportation. I walked on around the house, went up on the front porch and rang the bell. Nothing happened.

There was one of those tin mailboxes beside the door. I put my borrowed flashlight on it and saw that the name on the little tag was Fitzgerald. Right house, for sure. I rang the bell again. Still no answer. I turned the knob, and the door opened. It was all dark inside. I knew that Doc was on the porch too by this time.

Either Kornick was still on his way, or he'd been here and departed. Or else we were on a bum steer altogether, which I wouldn't let myself believe.

"Anybody home?" I sang out, good and loud.

There was a faint little creaking sound inside the house somewhere. I shoved Doc away from the doorway, flattened myself against the wall, and yanked out my gun. Framed in that doorway we would have been set-up targets. But no gun-flame jumped at us out of the blackness—just that funny little creak again.

"Keep back, Doc," I warned, feeling along the wall by the door where the light switch ought to be. I found it, but before I could snap it on, a car came tearing around the corner and roared down High Street, lights blazing.

I yanked Doc inside, and pushed the door shut just as the car braked to a stop right in front of the wooden steps. There was no time to see what kind of car it was, because somebody bounced out and came racing up those steps two at a time. I stood there with my hand on that switch and my gun ready. Feet crashed on the porch, the bell whirred.

Doc and I stood perfectly still. The bell whirred again. Then, as I'd figured, the guy tried the knob. The door swung open. As it did, I snapped the switch and said over my leveled gun: "Up with 'em, Kornick! Reach!"

Angry eyes blinked in the sudden glare of electricity.

"What are you doing here, McInnes?" demanded the harsh voice of Stephen Steele.

"The same to you," I growled disgustedly. I'd been so damned sure I'd trapped Kornick.

"You might come in and shut the door, Stephen," said Doc in his quiet way.

"I'm not walking into any trap, Alex!" rumbled Steele. "What is this convict McInnes doing with a gun? Where's Miss Ellison? Where's the man who telephoned me? I demand—"

"Shut your big mouth!" Doc's tone cut like a whiplash. "Come inside, shut that door, and stop making a fool of yourself."

Steele, rather to my surprise, did as he was told.

"That's better," said Doc. "We don't want the neighborhood all excited, or we'll scare off our bird. Now then. I'm here looking for a man named Kornick who just escaped."

"I know," cut in Steele. "It's been on the radio. That's the man who phoned me. The call came from a telephone in this house."

"How long ago?" I asked sharply.

"The call was made just after five-thirty. I remember because I had just switched on the five-thirty news."

"This was in your house in Lanchester?"

"Yes," Steele replied.

"What time is it now, Doc?" I asked. I didn't have a watch.

"Six-twenty-three," said Doc in his precise way.

"It's eighty miles from Lanchester to Bonnerville, Steele," I pointed out. "How'd you get here so quick?"

"Damn you, McInnes, who are you to question me like this?" roared Steele.

"McInnes, at the moment, is an officer of the law engaged in the pursuit of an escaped convict," snapped Doc. "I'll vouch for McInnes. You'd better answer his question."

Steele snorted. This he didn't go for. But he answered: "I came in my plane, of course, to the Bonnerville Dam site. The watchman had his car waiting for me. That's it out front there."

"Oh." I was deflated. I'd forgotten Steele's well-known system of airplane inspections. On every Steele Construction project, the first thing done was to bulldoze an airstrip for the great man's plane, so he could drop in unexpectedly and look things over. The Bonnerville Dam was one of Steele's jobs.

"And you say Kornick telephoned you?" Doc was sticking to the point.

"A man telephoned me who said he was Kornick," replied Steele, looking at me with a nasty suspicious glint in his eyes. "To quote his words exactly, he said: 'This is Kornick speaking, Mr. Steele. You know who I am?' I said I did—from the radio reports. 'Okay, Steele,' he said. 'Then you know I've got your girl. If you ever want to see her all in one piece again, Steele, call the dogs off my trail.' With that he hung up."

I cursed Kornick softly.

"And you?" pursued Doc.

"I had the telephone company trace the call—a matter of only a few seconds, since it was a toll call. I then called the sheriff at Torrence, but found him away from home. There's no policeman in Bonnerville, as I already knew. So I ordered my plane to be ready, called my watchman

at the dam site to have the landing-lights ready, went to the airport and flew myself over here to look into the matter in person."

"A typical Stephen Steele reaction," observed Doc in his driest voice. "Do it yourself, don't depend on anybody else. I suppose it never occurred to you to call up the State Highway Patrol and remind them about your landing strip? They could get planes from the National Guard, you know."

"They're a lot of incompetents," scoffed Steele.

"Seems to me you could have had your watchman get together a few men—"

Steele interrupted Doc with growing impatience.

"Work's stopped on the dam until April," he barked. "Nobody there but the watchman, and he's an old man. Now if you're through catechizing me, what I want to know—"

"Hold it," I cut in. All the time Steele and Doc had been talking, I'd been hearing that funny little creaking noise every now and then. It bothered me. I said: "I think there's somebody in the house. We better cut the chatter and take a look around."

So we did that.

We went through the house, snapping on lights as we went. Downstairs, there was a sitting room, dining room and kitchen. The place seemed deserted, but there was evidence of a hasty egg-frying in the kitchen. The cellar door was shut, and bolted on the house side.

Upstairs there were just two bedrooms, front and back, and a bath off the hall. There was nobody in the front bedroom, and nobody in the bath. The back bedroom door was locked. I slammed a heel into it just above the knob. It crashed open and the hall light shone on a white face bisected by a gag.

I almost cried out "Betty!" before I realized that the hair above the face was gray. Behind me, Doc flicked the light-switch. A little old lady in a gingham dress was stretched out on the bed with her wrists and ankles made fast to the bedposts with clothesline. The bedstead creaked as I helped untie her, which explained the sound I'd heard. It was the poor thing trying to work herself loose.

Tears of thankfulness were rolling down her face now.

"Just lie still, Mrs. Fitzgerald," said Ross. "I'm a doctor. You'll be all right now."

He had his little pocket case out, and was bending over her.

"Water," he snapped, and I got a glass from the bathroom. Steele stood by, still glowering. What he wanted was action.

So did I, for that matter. I wanted to be off after Kornick —and Elizabeth Ellison. But I

had to have some idea what direction to be off in.

The little old lady sat up obediently and drank Doc's potion.

When she lay back, Doc asked: "Now, Mrs. Fitzgerald, if you'll just tell us what happened."

"It was my nephew, Wally," she said weakly. "He's not really a bad boy—just misguided and headstrong."

Deftly and with gentleness, Doc drew the story from her, and twice while he was doing it I had to glare Steele into silence after premonitory rumbles of impatience. One outburst from him would have scared the poor thing into quivering silence.

She said that Kornick—"Wally," as she called him—had arrived at her house about a quarter past five or a little later, and had immediately demanded the money she'd been drawing from the bank for him according to a letter he'd written her. She'd given him the money, and he'd asked her to get him something to eat. When she came out of the kitchen to tell him it was ready, she heard him at the telephone calling the airport at Lanchester.

"I stopped there in the hall," she told Doc, "and listened. I don't know what ever made me do such a sneaky thing. I guess I just wanted to know what Wally was up to. I heard him tell somebody at the airport that he was the watchman for the Steele Construction Company at the Bonnerville Dam, and to ask if Mr. Steele's plane had taken off yet. Then he listened a minute and said, 'Thanks. I'll be on the lookout for him,' and hung up, and laughed kind of to himself and said 'Sucker!'

"Then he looked around and saw me, and he got a wicked look in his eyes and got up and came toward me, and I was scared he was going to hit me. But he just went on past me out to the kitchen, I s'posed to eat his supper. Instead, he came back with a piece of clothesline and a wicked little knife in his hand."

She stopped, shuddering.

"Is this the knife, Mrs. Fitzgerald?" Doc asked. He had picked up a glittering bit of steel from the bedside table. It was a doctor's scalpel, such as Doc kept in his surgical cabinet, with handle and gleaming double-edged blade forged out of one piece of metal.

Mrs. Fitzgerald nodded, turning her eyes away from the thing. Doc handed it to me.

"It would poke a hole in my pocket case," he said. "Take care of it, Frank."

I stuck it under the thong that was tied around the bottom of my holster, that being the only place I could carry it safely.

"What happened then, Mrs. Fitzgerald?" Doc asked gently.

"Wally—Wally made me come up here and lie down on the bed," she said. "Then he tied me, and gagged me with a dish-towel. Then he turned out the light and went off."

"Where was the young lady who was with him while all this was going on?" Doc asked.

"Young lady? I didn't see any young lady. Wally was all alone. He didn't have anybody with him," said Mrs. Fitzgerald.

My blood ran cold.

"Did you see the car he was driving?" Doc probed. "Was anybody in it?"

"Yes, I saw it in the driveway. It was kind of a black car—like a Chevvy it looked. I'm sure there wasn't anybody in it."

Then where was Elizabeth Ellison?

And where was Kornick? What was the idea of phoning Steele to make threats he must have known were idle, threats which would only put the dogs on his trail instead of calling them off? He wasn't such a fool that he didn't know how quick a toll-call could be traced. He'd called the Lanchester airport, too—and then had said "Sucker!" and laughed.

"Doc!" I said sharply. "Do you have a radio in your car? Will it pick up the police band?"

"Sure," said Doc.

Then Kornick would have been listening in. He'd have heard the frantic efforts to get a patrol car to Bonnerville. He'd have realized there were no cops here yet. And he'd know that when Steele tried to get action on that call of his, Steele would find that out too. So what then?

"You're a sucker, all right, Steele," I snapped. "Come on, let's get going."

Steele flushed brick-red, grabbed my arm as I started for the door.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You did just what Kornick guessed you'd do. You brought him an airplane for his getaway!" I flung at him. "He took pilot training in the war, before they kicked him out for stealing government cars. He knew you couldn't sit still, that you'd have to be doing something—and everybody in the State knows about your private plane and your air-strip system and the Bonnerville Dam. He just put it all together and it added up to a getaway plane for Smiley Kornick! As Doc said, a typical Steele reaction. Now come on, for God's sake, let's get up to that strip and hope we're still in time!"

"You'll have to count me out, Frank," said Doc. "I'm afraid I've underestimated that crack on the head I took."

I hadn't realized before how pale he was getting, but now I recalled how he had sort of

faded out during the drive. He really looked sick.

"I hate to let you down, Frank," he muttered.

"Okay, Doc," I said. "You better call the warden and the highway boys and tell 'em about Steele's plane and what we figure about Kornick. I'll make out with Steele to help me."

"Be real careful, officer," said Mrs. Fitzgerald's weak voice. "Wally's got a gun that I was keeping for him. But please don't hurt him if you don't have to."

"Thanks, ma'am," I tossed at her over my shoulder as I went out the door. Oh, no, I wouldn't hurt her darling Wally if I got my hands on him! Not much I wouldn't. But it was sweet of her to warn me about the gun, at that. I guess she figured Wally might be better off back in the penitentiary than getting fried for murder.

Steele hit the porch right behind me.

"I've got the warden's Caddy parked up the block," I told him. "We'd better use it and leave your car here."

Steele just elbowed me aside, jumped into his car and slammed the door in my face. The motor whirred into life.

I turned and ran along the dark sidewalk toward the corner.

By the time I got there, Steele had made a U-turn and was coming up the street. I slid into the Caddy as he went past the corner, started up, backed and turned and went after him. I didn't dare lose sight of his taillights, because I had no idea how to get to the dam site and I had no time to ask questions. The pig-headed fool! I wasn't even sure he had a gun. But he'd have no part of me. Another typical Steele reaction. That was my reward for sticking pins in his ego.

He was driving fast—getting all the speed he could out of the rattletrap he'd borrowed from the watchman. We roared through the main street of Bonnerville and out on a two-lane concrete road. "Lanchester 81" read a sign that showed up in the Caddy's headlights. Keeping about a hundred feet behind Steele, I watched my speedometer needle climb to 70, and then to 75. Then his left rear light began winking and I eased on the gas. He was slowing down too. He took a sharp left turn, still doing sixty, and the Caddy's big tires screamed on the concrete as I went around after him into a dirt road that immediately began climbing. It was rough going, but Steele kept a 50-60 pace just the same, which was all right with me.

I had just one thought—to get to Kornickk and beat out of him what he'd done with Elizabeth Ellison. I suppose in one corner of my head I still remembered that Kornick, alive and

able to talk, was important to my personal fortunes too. But right then I was concentrating on Elizabeth.

Pretty soon, as we came over a rise, I saw a glare on the sky above the next crest. That would be the flood-lights at the air-strip. Down into the dip went Steele's car, with me right after him, and up that last slope. As his tail-lights disappeared over it, I cut my own lights. If Kornick was there, there was no use advertising that Steele had company. I could just see well enough to keep the Caddy on the road until I hit the crest.

The first thing I saw was the plane, a nice little cabin job sitting out in the middle of the field with the flood-lights playing on it and a man walking up and down nearby—a man with a badge on his chest that winked as he turned to see who was coming. I turned off the motor and coasted quietly down to a stop near a little shack at the edge of the field.

Steele had already braked to a stop right in front of the shack.

He bounced out before his car had stopped moving. I heard him yell: "Ryan! You all right?"

The man with the badge waved a reassuring arm and came trotting toward Steele across the wide field.

Everything seemed all right. But I wasn't buying comfortable appearances. There was a light in the shack. I got out of my car without making any noise and walked round behind the shack. That light was shining out of a back window, and I thought it just touched something that gleamed—like maybe the chrome ring around a car's headlight. I kept close to the board wall of the shack where I wouldn't be easy to see.

I was so right. There was a car parked back there in the shadows. It looked like Doc's Chevvy. I dropped to my knees, and crawled cautiously along underneath that window, eyes on the car, hand ready to grab for my gun. I came to the corner of the shack. I was right opposite the car, maybe four or five feet from it. The windows were closed but I could see a faint reflection on the glass.

It was Doc's car, all right. If Kornick was in it, he'd have to lower a window or open a door to get a shot at me. I got my feet up under me, dived and yanked open the right hand door, gun out and ready. There was nobody in the front seat—and nobody in the back. Except—where was that heavy breathing coming from? I opened the back door, and froze. Something bulked on the floor—something that stirred a little and breathed. It was covered by a furry lap-robe.

I crouched by that open door, looking apprehensively around

into the chilly darkness. Out in front, the engine of Steele's car was still purring. Otherwise, there was no sound. I lifted the edge of the robe, put out a groping hand—and touched a face. Instantly I knew.

"Betty!" I said. The face moved a little under my hand. "It's Frank, Betty," I whispered. "Take it easy."

I had my flashlight out now. I sent the beam underneath the robe; swore softly. Her mouth was crisscrossed by tape. Her hands were pulled behind her and taped to the foot-rest. So were her ankles. She looked miserable.

"Betty," I whispered again. "I'm going to take that tape off. Don't yell. It's not safe to be noisy. Nod if you understand."

She nodded feebly.

I got hold of a corner of the tape on her face and gave one swift pull. As it peeled off she let out a little moan, opened her mouth and began gasping air into her tormented lungs. Kornick, I thought, just you wait.

I knew I ought to leave her now. Kornick wouldn't be far away, might even be creeping up on me as I squatted there. But I couldn't bear not to get her loose first. She must be suffering the agonies of hell, trussed up so cruelly.

I remembered Doc's scalpel. I laid my gun handy on the floor of the car by Betty's head. I wasn't thinking of her as Elizabeth any more. Betty had taken over all of a sudden. I got out the scalpel, and put my hands and head under the robe, hoping it would hide the glow of the flashlight. My little knife was sure sharp. Two quick strokes sliced the tape on her wrists, and two more freed her slender ankles.

I drew back.

"Take it easy, Betty," I warned. "And stay in the car until I come back."

Her eyes were staring. There was stark fear in them, and I realized they were fixed in terror on that glittering scalpel in my right hand. Poor kid. She'd been through enough to scare anybody. The highly efficient Miss Ellison wasn't accustomed to violence. I snapped off the flash, and bent swiftly, instinctively, to kiss the pale blur of her face. She twisted it away from me. So okay, then—if that was the way she still wanted it.

I eased out of the car, closing the door carefully. I could hear voices in the shack now—Steele giving the watchman the old cross-exam., I thought. But where was Kornick? I went along the blank end of the shack. Steele's car was still out there, its engine still running and the plane was there too, but with nobody in sight on the glaring airstrip.

In the cone of shadow be-

tween the two floodlamps, I moved toward the yellow fan of light that spread out from the half-open door. And heard Smiley Kornick's voice, coming through that door just as I reached it.

"—can't thank you enough, Mr. Steele. You've reacted just as I desired. If you'd been a monkey on a stick you couldn't have responded more promptly to my wishes."

I eased up to the door where I could look into the shack. Steele stood against the board wall, his hands raised shoulder high. He wasn't looking my way. He was looking straight at Kornick—head up, scorn written all over his granite mug. Kornick stood in front of him with gun in hand, and his back to the door —and to me.

He was wearing a dark cap and a short dark coat like a Navy pea-jacket. I realized that these were the garments I'd seen on the man with the badge, the man I'd taken for the watchman. As Steele had too, apparently—until Kornick had gotten close enough to pull a gun on him. I could guess what had happened to the watchman.

Kornick was going right on with his chatter, his voice thick with self-appreciation. "Let me tell you what I owe to your cooperation, Mr. Steele. First of all, in the matter of that warning note I sent you. You remember it? I see you do. All I had in mind was to stir you up a little, though I did expect that you'd come to talk it over with your friend Doc Ross. Afterward, I had a vague idea that I might hang a good substantial frame on some outgoing oaf, after arranging for suitable corroborative detail, and perhaps derive some personal advantage in the process—even gain your support for an application for clemency. But you, Mr. Steele, presented me with something far more acceptable."

He laughed softly. He was really happy. I knew what I ought to do. I ought to walk in nice and quiet and invite Mr. Smiley Kornick to drop his rod and reach for the rafters. As Doc had said, I was—at least temporarily—an officer of the law. But I couldn't bring myself to interrupt this fascinating narrative.

An officer of the law, I told myself, shouldn't neglect any opportunity to gain useful information. Especially for free. And this information was of the greatest personal value to me, too—especially when it was shoved at Stephen Steele firsthand this way. So I kept listening, with my gun ready in case Kornick turned around and saw me.

Kornick wasn't even thinking of turning around. He was getting too much satisfaction out of

baiting Stephen Steele. It came to me that he hated Steele as much as anybody did—maybe more—and that his hatred was informed by a devious intelligence that made him understand how to torture his victim.

Now he went on, positively purring: "Yes, sir, Mr. Steele, you began to be really helpful right then. You not only came to see Doc, but you spouted that beautiful little parting speech where you said what you'd do to any man you even suspected of a design against your boy. Your remarks made a great impression on me—and on a number of men who thereafter found themselves on the point of leaving our institution. Such men are highly vulnerable to any influence which may seem to threaten a hitch in their bright prospects of freedom. I had only to hint that a little money deposited in my aunt's bank account might prevent me from offering them up as sacrifices to your anxiety. When they heard you say what you would do in such a case—"

"When you told them what I said, you mean," cut in Steele. "And they believed you? Bah."

"No, no, Mr. Steele," Kornick chuckled. "They heard your own voice—a voice made painfully familiar to them all by your famous radio broadcasts before the warden stopped piping them into our cell-house ear-phones. Oh, perhaps I forgot to explain that as an old-time automobile thief, I have had much experience in what might be termed short-cuts in activating electrical devices."

I just managed to swallow a sharp exclamation — of self-disgust. What a dummy I'd been not to think of *that* one.

Kornick went on explaining: "I was able," said he, "to record your remarks on Doc's recorder, which he thought was turned off, and which McInnes—if he noticed at all that it was running—undoubtedly thought Doc had turned on. That record was truly impressive, Mr. Steele. You put real feeling into what you said. You would have enjoyed watching the faces of men on the threshold of liberty as they listened to you and realized what might happen to them if your attention were directed to them."

"You swine," said Steele through clenched teeth. It was cold in that shack, but the sweat was running down his face now. The thing was beginning to get him.

I wouldn't have stopped it for anything. I needed to hear more—the whole story. And I was just human-mean enough to take satisfaction in watching the great Stephen Steele squirm. As for Kornick, if he'd had a lick of sense he'd've been giving his attention to getting that plane off the ground and buzzing off from there fast while the buzz-

ing was good. Of course he had no idea that Steele had brought reinforcements along, but he must have known that reinforcements might arrive at any minute, if he'd once stopped to think about it. He was too busy caressing his own self-esteem.

"Tut-tut," he sweetly answered Steele's imprecations. "Mustn't be a bad loser, Mr. Steele. You did your best to defeat me, but of course you couldn't realize what you were up against. Let me go on. You'll recall that two of the men from whom I hoped to collect funds disappointed me. One tried to kill you and was killed himself; the other came back to prison to try to kill me. At the same time poor McInnes blundered into your clutches—though I had nothing to do with that.

"You became upset—perhaps bewildered is the better word. You sent McInnes back to prison too, hoping that he might learn what was really happening. I'll admit that disturbed me. I had changed my mind about seeking executive clemency. With a reasonable cash stake in prospect, I'd decided it would be better to crash out through the front door in Doc's hat and coat and an admirable false beard—my own handiwork.

"You see, I'd had this plan in reserve for some time, against emergencies, and the false beard was ready. But events crowded in upon me. Of course I recorded the conversation which McInnes had with Doc yesterday morning—the day he returned to prison. When I played back that record, I decided it might be advisable to allow Johnny Jobin to hear part of it and to trust to my own persuasive powers to convince Jobin that you had sent McInnes inside the walls to hang a nice frame on one Johnny Jobin.

"So I arranged for Jobin to be sent up front right away—a mere matter of forging Doc's initials while he was making his hospital rounds—and I found Jobin quite susceptible to the suggestion. Indeed Jobin assured me that McInnes would never return alive from the yard that Saturday afternoon. But I tried to give McInnes an out by making him aware of Jobin's intentions, with the idea that he might run to Doc for help and be put into isolation where he couldn't further imperil my plans. But he didn't scare—and Jobin bungled the job. Then word reached me that today Ben Brague—you remember Brague—would return to prison.

"I knew that if Brague and McInnes got together, I'd be in serious difficulties. McInnes is much more intelligent than he looks—" (well, thanks, Smiley, thought I)—"and once he heard Brague's story he might begin to cause me some real anxiety. All

depended on Jobin managing to dispose of McInnes this afternoon. But Brague interferred and again Jobin failed me.

"For a moment I felt myself in a corner. But you, sir, came to my rescue nobly. Your rather childish impatience for a report from McInnes caused you to send your not-too-exciting girl friend to the prison. Miss Ellison made an admirable foil for my impersonation of Doc Ross as we went out the front door together. With her by my side, suitably intimidated, the stupid guard never thought of looking twice at me, or questioning the texture of my false beard. Thank you again, Steele."

Steele's shoulders were sagging now. He still managed to look Kornick in the eye, but his face was the face of a beaten man. Never before in all his life, I imagined, had Stephen Steele suffered the acid bite of justified derision.

All his adult years he had used other men as puppets. Now he'd been so used himself—and by a despised convict working from inside prison walls. That hurt worst of all. And Kornick knew how to twist the knife in the wound.

Kornick was talking a little faster now. Perhaps some sense of urgency was filtering through the cracks of his self-satisfaction at last. I gripped my gun a little tighter, ready for the final scene of this entrancing drama—a scene written by McInnes and not by Kornick.

"So, Mr. Steele," Kornick went on, "I left the prison door already deeply in your debt. I came here and collected my money. And then it occurred to me that by sending me Miss Ellison, you had provided me with a decoy which might be turned to further account. You will admit that I gauged your reactions to my telephone call with admirable accuracy. When you found out what I already knew —that you could not get quick police attention—you came yourself, bringing me an airplane in which we shall presently be flying to safety beyond the Mexican border."

"We?" gasped Steele, startled out of the depths of his awful humiliation.

"Of course. I have already written the note which will be left here to inform pursuers that you are with me. Your final gift to me, Mr. Steele, is yourself as hostage to insure that my flight to freedom will suffer no interference. And now, perhaps, we had best be going."

"If you think you can induce or force me to get into that plane with you, you filthy scoundrel," said Steele in a low tortured voice, "you are greatly mistaken. You'll have to kill me first."

"In that case—" began Kornick.

I guessed what was coming. It was time to make an end. I lifted my gun and took a step toward the door.

Two arms went round me from behind, clinging desperately tight, pinning my elbows to my side.

"Mr. Steele!" screamed Elizabeth Ellison's voice right in my ear. "Look out, Mr. Steele—it's McInnes. He's got a gun."

Kornick whirled and saw me. I flung myself to the ground, dragging Elizabeth down with me just as Kornick's gun roared. The fall broke Elizabeth's hold—and it also knocked my gun out of my hand. There was no time to look for it. I rolled away from the doorway just as Kornick came charging out through it. He snapped one more shot at me and ran for the plane with panic lending wings to his feet. Elizabeth was whimpering with terror. Steele began shouting something incoherent.

I scrambled up, made Steele's still-running car in two leaps, spun the wheel and jammed my foot on the gas pedal. The old car roared as I hurled it in pursuit of Kornick. He was halfway to the plane now, but I was sure he'd never make it. I saw his white, scared face looking back over his shoulder, and then, just as the car was on him, he dodged aside like a rabbit. I tore at the wheel, and the car skidded on the dead grass of the strip. I fought to bring it under control, but my eyes were blinded now by one of the floodlamps. A bullet crashed through the glass at the back of the car.

Somebody was screaming. It was Elizabeth. "The plane, Frank! He's in the plane!"

That girl certainly changed sides fast.

As I brought the car around in a careful turn—another skid would have been one too many—I heard the sudden roar of the plane's engine revving up. Now, as the car headed for it again, the silver fuselage began to move. I doubted if the engine would be warm enough for a safe takeoff, but Kornick was on his way, hot or cold. And it was my fault. I could have taken him if I hadn't been so happy to hear him telling Steele off.

Teeth set for the shock of collision, I hurled the car straight at the rolling plane. The wheels slipped and spun on that damned grass. Kornick was gaining on me. I wasn't going to be able to crash him. He was going to get away.

Then suddenly the plane yawed, the tail swinging round toward me as though one of the wheels had hit an obstruction. My charging car crashed into the tail assembly with a terrible clamor of rending metal. The shock flung me up against the steering wheel. My head hit the roof of the car, half-stunning

me. But driven now by a demon that knew no turning back, I managed to kick open the right-hand door and roll clear of the wreckage.

The plane's engine was roaring furiously. It was dragging the plane and the entangled car along like a wounded animal trying to crawl to refuge. Then suddenly it died and I was running. I had to get Kornick. I had no room for any other impulse —not even self-preservation. I came up to the plane. The little ladder still hung from the side door. Up I went, tearing at the door handle.

The door opened, and I hoisted myself into the plane, lurched forward to the pilot's seat. Kornick was still struggling with the controls, trying to re-start the engine, when my hands closed on his neck and drove his head forward against the cowling. Once—and then again and again until he went limp in my grasp and I heard Elizabeth screaming at me from the open door.

"Frank! Get out, Frank! The plane's on fire—"

Through the swift red glare I dragged Smiley Kornick. I threw him out on the grass, and leaped after him. With a wicked scarlet *whooshh,* the flames pursued me, billowing out suddenly from the doomed plane. I staggered as my feet hit the ground, knowing I was going to fall, knowing that to fall meant death by fire. Then a strong hand was under my armpit and Stephen Steele was bracing my body with his own and bearing me up with his great strength until I regained my balance.

We seized Kornick by his ankles and ran, Kornick's body trailing behind us on the smoking grass while the fire reached out for us with vicious scarlet tentacles that burned and seared but could not quite cut us down.

Then I was lying on the ground and Elizabeth Ellison was beating out the smoldering sparks in my clothing—beating them out with her skirt, wielded in both hands. Steele was rolling on the grass near by, attending to his own sparks.

I got up. I throbbed and ached all over, from my battered head down to my singed legs. But nothing seemed to be broken, or otherwise permanently out of action. Kornick lay a few feet away, unmoving, but still breathing. *He'll be talking after a while,* I thought as I bent over him. I felt him over carefully to make sure there was no second gun on him.

Then I turned around to thank Elizabeth, but she wasn't there. Steele was, though, and he was coming toward me. Fire-light and flood-lamp laid merciless illumination across his face, bringing out every line and angle.

"McInnes," he said. And

again, "McInnes." He couldn't seem to get any farther. He swallowed hard. "McInnes," he said for the third time, and he pulled my .45 from the waistband of his trousers and held it toward me, butt first. "I found your gun by the door," he went on. "I thought you might need it—to guard your prisoner."

If a thousand Stephen Steeles in convention assembled had risen to their feet and passed by acclamation a vote of confidence in Frank McInnes, it couldn't have hit me any harder.

"Thanks, Steele," I said. I dropped the gun into my empty holster. I found I was pretty well out of words too. In that terrible light, I saw in Stephen Steele's eyes what I would have sworn no man would ever see there—the birthpangs of humility.

"Our deal stands, McInnes," Steele said. "If you want it that way. Only—"

"Only what?" I asked as he paused. Not with suspicion. Just with curiosity, for I was sure he meant me no harm now.

"Only," said Steele, "I don't believe any man can run and hide from his past. To South America or anywhere else. I'd rather see you face your past and overcome it. I'd like it, McInnes, if you'd stay here, and help me try to revamp my Citizen's Crime Committee into an organization that can breed hope instead of hate in human hearts."

I could only stare at him, stricken into gaping silence.

"I've been responsible for too much hate, McInnes," said Stephen Steele into that silence. "Will you help me make amends—as far as I can?"

He held out his hand.

I took it. And that was something else I'd never thought would happen.

After that it seemed to matter very little that as we stood there a Highway Patrol cruiser came roaring over the brow of the hill, slid to a brake-shrieking halt in front of the shack and spilled out two excited young patrolmen and Doc Ross.

There followed a lot of gabble, with good old Doc shaking my hand and the patrolmen putting the bracelets on the still-unconscious Kornick and trying to explain to Steele just why they hadn't arrived before, and how when they saw the fire they—and so on and so on.

One of them finally got official and lugged out his notebook.

"We better get the facts down," he said, scribbling. "Kornick, his name is? Escaped convict. Assault. Arson of aircraft."

"And murder," said Stephen Steele. "Come over here."

He led the way to the torn-up ground where the plane had

yawed and I'd crashed into its tail. Just beyond, at the very edge of the deep shadow where the flood-light's path tapered into darkness, he pointed. "There," he said.

A patrolman's flashlight showed us the crumpled, tire-marked body of an elderly man —the watchman. There was a bullet-hole in the back of his head.

But even in death he'd stopped Kornick, for it was his body that the right-hand wheel of the fleeing plane had struck. Save for that, Kornick might have escaped.

Now he'd burn.

"The price of hate," said Stephen Steele, looking down at the dead watchman. "Innocent blood."

"So you've learned that at last, Stephen," said Doc Ross softly. "I knew you would in time."

I left them standing there and went to look for Elizabeth.

She was in the shack, sitting in a wooden chair staring straight in front of her. She wasn't crying any more.

She was a mess. Her face was criss-crossed by the smudgy welts the tape had left. There was a nasty bruise on her chin, which was swelling and turning purplish. Her face, neck, hands, and the bare arm which hung limply amid the remains of a torn sleeve, were black with assorted grime. She had her skirt on again. But her shoes were gone, and her stockings hung in shreds about her ankles. Her feet were bleeding.

She looked wonderful.

I touched her shoulder. "Elizabeth," I said.

She didn't look up. She just said: "I'm sorry, Frank. I might have killed you."

No icicles. But no warmth either. Just words. I couldn't think of any bright replies.

After a minute she went on: "I'd better tell you what happened. That man—" she shuddered—"met me as I came out of the lavatory in Doctor Ross' office. He had a knife. A wicked little glittery steel knife. I'll never forget that knife—never. He told me what he'd do with it if I didn't go with him. I went with him. My mind was numb with terror. He made me get into a car. We drove off. A little way from the prison, he stopped the car, turned and sent his fist crashing against my jaw.

"The next I knew, I was tied up in the back of the car. I was there a long time. Sometimes the car was stopped, sometimes it was going. I couldn't see anything. The robe was over me. I had all I could do to breathe. My nose kept stopping up. I had to fight to keep air in my lungs. Then you came. When I heard your voice I thought I'd never heard anything so beautiful in

all my life. Until—I saw his knife in your hand."

"My God!" I breathed, adding quickly: "Don't say another word, Elizabeth. I get it now."

She didn't stop talking, though. She kept on, still in that half-dead voice:

"I couldn't think of anything except that you had that knife, and when I'd seen it last he had it. Remember, I didn't know anything about what was going on, I didn't even know where I was. I had to know. I tried and tried to get out of the car. At first I couldn't. My arms and legs wouldn't work. When I did get out, for a long time I couldn't stand up. I kept hearing voices, but I couldn't recognize them, I couldn't make out what was being said.

"Finally I could walk a little. I went around this shack and saw you standing by the door. With a gun in your hand. I came closer. I heard Mr. Steele's voice —and saw you lift your gun and start to go inside. I've been close to Mr. Steele for a long time. I owe him a great deal, including —loyalty. So I grabbed you and called out to warn him."

She choked up on that. I wanted to get down on my knees beside her and take her in my arms. Something told me not to. Not yet. I realized that among other things she was telling me —as plainly as her pride would let her—that she'd never been Steele's girl friend. It was terribly important to me that she wanted to tell me that.

I saw Doc Ross come to the door of the shack, look in, nod and turn away. I hoped he'd keep the others out—for a while, at least.

Elizabeth got her voice back, went on: "Then the shooting started. That man ran toward the plane, and you started after him in the car. And then Mr. Steele came out and made clear to me just what I had done. So —so I tried to help you."

She lifted her head and looked at me for the first time. From within their rings of grime, her blue eyes surveyed me gravely, not begging forgiveness, but sort of hoping for understanding.

I bent over her, slipped my arm around her, felt her stiffen at my touch.

"You saved my life, Elizabeth," I told her.

In a voice hardly above a whisper, she said: "When you found me you called me Betty."

I snatched her out of that chair and held her tight against me. The stiffness melted from her thin body. She pressed against me and lifted her poor bedraggled adorable face, and I kissed her on the mouth.

"Betty," I murmured. "My Betty."

I kissed her neck and her bruised chin and one scratched shoulder that showed through

her tatters. I came back to her mouth—her warm mouth that opened under mine. She began to tremble.

"I love you, Betty," I said. "Will you—will you wait for me a little while? Will you, darling?"

She pushed me back from her, both hands on my shoulders.

"Wait?" The blue eyes were full of questions.

"I mean—I'm not going to South America. Steele wants me to stay here and work with him on the Crime Committee."

"But you said *wait,*" she cut in.

"Betty, I'm still an ex-convict," I told her. "If I stay here, I'll have to live with that fact. I think I ought to try it out for two or three years—get people to think of me differently, if I can—before I ask anybody else to live with my burden."

The blue eyes were snapping blue fire. "Frank McInnes," she said in her best icicle voice, "you've been out of circulation for three years. Right?"

"Right," I said.

"And you're no saint."

"No."

"I don't insist you should try to become one now," said the icicle-voice. "But I don't propose that you should thaw out in any other woman's arms, either. So there'll be no nonsense about waiting." How she managed to blush under all that grime, I don't know. But she did. Then her austere expression dissolved into an impish grin. "I've just found out something, darling," said my Betty in a voice from which all the icicles had melted. "I've found out that for you I have what it takes."

The samples were very convincing.

THE SAINT'S BACK AGAIN WITH A BRAND NEW ROLLICKING ADVENTURE, "THE RELUCTANT NUDIST"—IN THE NEXT ISSUE.

i'll die laughing

by . . . Peter Harris

Two people heard the shot which killed Uncle Harry. Why did his mirth so eerily mock the evidence?

"I'LL die laughing," was Uncle Harry's favorite expression —and to see him laugh anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of medical case histories would certainly believe that mirth was bad for him. His face, from the roots of his hair to his massive chin, gradually turned purple, his small, deepset eyes dilated, and internal explosions rocked every ounce of his bulky frame.

Then he would pull a handkerchief out of his breast-pocket and mop his brow, very much as a man might after strenuous exercise. "I'll die laughing," he would gasp.

And laughter was the last sound the parties most concerned heard coming from Harry Fairbrother, who was not really anyone's uncle but had acquired the Uncle Harry nickname in the village. When his housekeeper, Mrs. Davidson, went into his study to shut the French windows at quarter to ten on the morning of the murder she found him lying on the floor with his skull

There is probably no more likely candidate for annihilation in detective fiction than the sneering recluse who antagonizes his neighbors and close relatives by a parsimony inconsistent with his wealth. If he has in addition a perverted sense of humor his enemies are sure to be legion. But seldom has a murder mystery revolving about such a man achieved a more dramatic impact in very brief compass than in this tiny bedside chiller by the gifted Mr. Harris.

fractured. He died in a hospital without regaining consciousness.

The murder weapon was a short heavy stick rimmed with metal, which the police found beside a pathway leading to the cottage of Jim Matthews, a local painter and general repair man. The stick belonged to Uncle Harry and he usually kept it in his study in case of need.

It did not take the sheriff long to discover that although Uncle Harry laughed a lot, he had not been at all popular with his neighbors.

Matthews was thought to have become resentful because, after he had spent a week painting the house, Uncle Harry had claimed that his charge for the job was fantastically exorbitant.

Then there was Uncle Harry's stepson, Ralph Anderson, who lived with him and ran his farm. It was no secret in the village that Anderson took the entire responsibility for the place and yet was paid wages which an ordinary farmhand would have refused to consider. Of course, he could have simply walked out on Uncle Harry, but he hoped to inherit the farm eventually and preferred to put up with his stepfather's meanness and derisive laughter. But he was not always able to conceal the way he felt.

Anderson was out when the sheriff called, so he interviewed the housekeeper first. Nobody knew why she put up with Uncle Harry, but it was perhaps important to remember that she had been with the family a long time.

Mrs. Davidson said she had been sitting in her room most of the evening. Her employer had remained in his study reading, or so she had supposed.

"And Mr. Anderson?" the sheriff asked.

"He took a gun and went out. It was bright moonlight, and he was hoping he could find and shoot a wild rabbit, at the far end of the farm."

"Did he tell you that himself?" the sheriff asked.

"No," Mrs. Davidson replied. "I overheard him talking to his stepfather, asking if he could borrow the gun. Mr. Fairbrother said, 'All right, I'll load it for you.' I was more than a little surprised."

"Why surprised?"

"Well," said the housekeeper hesitantly," Mr. Fairbrother was not ordinarily a very thoughtful man—and besides, there had been quite a bit of ill-feeling between them."

"Why ill-feeling?" the sheriff asked.

"It was Mr. Fairbrother's peculiar sense of humor," said Mrs. Davidson.

"And Mr. Anderson couldn't take a joke? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"Not when it was always against himself," confirmed the housekeeper.

"Tell me about yesterday evening," said the sheriff.

According to Mrs. Davidson, there wasn't much to tell. About half an hour after Mr. Anderson's departure there had come to her ears a distant shot, supposedly signaling the death of the wild rabbit. But not long afterwards—she had failed to notice the time—she had heard from the other end of the house the sound of Mr. Fairbrother's laughter.

Not long after that she had heard a second shot, and Mr. Anderson had returned at about nine-thirty by the kitchen clock.

Matthews, the repair man, whom the sheriff visited at his cottage, was surly and unhelpful —though quite obviously frightened. He could not explain how the metal-rimmed stick came to be lying in the pathway that led to his cottage and nowhere else. Neither could he give an explanation of his movements that could be readily verified.

The sheriff decided to go back to the farm and await Anderson's return. He found him in an outhouse, preparing to clean a double-barreled shotgun. His story was consistent with the housekeeper's throughout. He had gone in search of the wild rabbit at about half-past eight, and had returned to the farmhouse more than an hour later.

"Any luck?" the sheriff asked. "With the shooting, I mean."

"No," Anderson replied. "I got two shots in at different times—one from each barrel—but they went wide of the mark. I think there's something wrong with the sights."

The sheriff picked up the shotgun and examined it. He looked in the barrel. "A bit messy," he remarked.

"Yes," Anderson agreed. "I was just going to clean it."

"I wouldn't advise that," said the sheriff. "It might be needed as evidence."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Anderson. "My stepfather was struck on the head—not shot."

"Undoubtedly," said the sheriff, "and I think the condition of this gun may explain why."

He paused, relit his pipe and went on: "The one part of the housekeeper's story which I couldn't understand was that when he was supposedly alone, your stepfather suddenly laughed.

"Of course, people *do* occasionally laugh when they are by themselves—perhaps at something they're reading. But Mr. Fairbrother's book didn't seem particularly funny. I examined it, you see. And then I thought: Suppose he had been laughing at a *person*—for apparently he was much given to laughing at *people*.

"Suppose we assume that

while your stepfather was sitting in his study, somebody appeared at the open French window. That's not usually an occasion for laughter. It might have been a prowler. Mr. Fairbrother would not have laughed at him. Or it might have been Matthews, who bore him a grudge, and we can be sure your stepfather wouldn't have laughed at him either."

The sheriff's face was grim.

"But he would have laughed at you, Mr. Anderson, because he had just lent you a gun that he'd loaded with blank cartridges—as the condition of the barrel shows, and as you had discovered after firing the first cartridge. Yes, your appearance just then would have amused him enormously. But you didn't share the joke. For you it was the last straw.

"The metal-rimmed stick was handy. Probably on impulse, you picked it up, and hit him once, very hard. Quite possibly you were sorry afterwards, but by then it was too late for remorse. So you took the murder weapon and after wiping your fingerprints off it, you left it where you hoped it would incriminate Matthews. Then you fired the second blank, so that the housekeeper would infer that you had been out in the fields all the time."

The sheriff's lips framed the ghost of a smile. "Your stepfather always said he'd die laughing, and that's just about what he did. Now shall we go?"

MELODY IN DEATH

By BAYNARD KENDRICK

When murder comes unashamedly tripping right out on an opera stage bright with rehearsal-room gaiety, and a famed tenor's springtime melody reaches down into the heart with strains reminiscent and haunting, and there's a girl named Gina in the cast whose glamor has become a legend—well, naturally all eyes will turn to a man clutching a U-shaped brace harnessed to a German shepherd dog. He's Captain Maclain, of course, Baynard Kendrick's unforgettable blind detective. And this—we'll admit it frankly—is just the most fleeting of previews, designed to make sure ***you*** *won't miss* MELODY IN DEATH, *in our very next issue at all newsstands.*

the sunken suitcase

by . . . Freeman Wills Crofts

In ancient Greece a Nemesis was a disembodied horror which pursued a man night and day. But Killer Ranck's Nemesis was uglier by far.

ALBERT RANCK shivered in the chill wind which was blowing along the platform of Thorpe Station on this late February afternoon. Wearing a thin soiled waterproof and carrying a small suitcase, he shrank behind a stack of luggage. He wished to avoid notice for he was on a terrible errand: no less than the murder of his enemy, David Turner.

Ranck was porter, boots and general factotum in a small hotel in North London. He was a careful, hardworking man, unmarried, and three months earlier had been good humored, cheerful and contented. Then all at once something seemed to go wrong, and one blow after another fell upon him till he had reached his present unhappy situation.

It began about money. A friend of his was employed in a training stable and from him Ranck learnt that a great deal of easy money was to be made out of horses, if only one had the necessary inside information. Such information, he had been

Few mystery writers—even in that tradition-resplendent milieu when London's fictional sleuthing seemed almost to blend with the activities of Scotland Yard itself—excel Freeman Wills Crofts in his meticulous attention to police routine details and his flair for the terrifyingly unexpected. He has a penchant for the little men of crime—the desperate, harassed clerk hidden away in some drab shop in Soho, or the secretive, would-be widower with arsenic or cyanide on his mind. Here's a Crofts gem with a chilling, ruby-red luster.

assured, the friend possessed. Ranck was persuaded to back the friend's boasted ability to pick several winners in succession.

At first he had the usual beginners' luck, followed after a week or two by the usual disastrous losses. His difficulties increased until for the sake of a few pounds he was faced with the loss of his job and everything he held dear.

In his distress he lost his head. A large number of minor hold-ups had taken place in this North London area, all, it was thought, the work of one gang. Ranck determined to try his hand at petty crime, believing that his activities would be put down to the gang. It was of course fantastically foolish, but he felt sure he could get away with it.

The scene of his first exploit was to be a small newsagent's shop. He had watched the place and knew that the elderly proprietor disappeared for tea each afternoon, leaving a young girl assistant in charge. On a dark and blustery November afternoon Ranck entered, asked for cigarettes, and when the girl opened the cash register for change, he grabbed the little stack of notes it contained.

The affair didn't work out quite as he had hoped. There was a slight delay in releasing the notes from under their clip, and the girl's cries brought the proprietor running. Before Ranck could get away the old man had seized him. To free himself Ranck hit out.

As he ran from the shop he saw his victim falling backwards. He got safely away, but next day he learnt from the papers that the man had struck his head in the fall and was dead.

Ranck was overwhelmed. The last thing he had wished was to hurt anyone, and he would have given all he had a dozen times over to bring the man back to life. Then as the immediate horror dulled, fear for his own safety took its place. He sweated as he pictured the arrival at the hotel of two hard-eyed plain-clothesmen and with a shrinking terror thought of what might follow. But one, two and three days passed without incident, and gradually he began to breathe more freely.

Then on the third evening the blow fell, though it was not the one he had been dreading. As he left the hotel for a short break a stranger fell into step beside him.

"My name's Turner," said the man. "David Turner. You're Albert Ranck?"

Ranck nodded, paling visibly.

"I saw what happened on Tuesday," Turner continued. "I heard the girl scream and I saw you run out. I waited till the police came and I told them."

Ranck's heart missed a beat. Then tremulously he muttered:

"You're mistaken. In fact, I have not the least idea what you're talking about."

"Quite," the other answered. "You can tell that to the police when the time comes."

A remnant of Ranck's courage was coming back. "I don't believe you," he declared. "If you'd made an accusation the police would have come to question me. They haven't."

"I'm not that much of a fool," Turner replied. "I told them I recognized your face but couldn't place you. But don't you make any mistake. I can remember who you are at any time and then you'll be looking up at the hangman's noose."

Ranck glanced at the other's face. There was greed in it and a vindictive joy, but of compassion no trace. The man would do what he said. "What do you want?" Ranck asked thickly.

"Ah, that's better." Turner's manner grew almost friendly. "Half of the money you took from the cash register, and a pound a week and I'll forget what I saw. I mean as long as the pound goes on."

Ranck exclaimed at the extortion. He pleaded, he threatened, he declared he couldn't pay—all to no purpose. In the end, as he had known from the beginning, he had to agree.

When Turner left him he was in despair. From now on he would be in Turner's power. Sooner or later there would be further demands. A chance word might give him away. Not merely his happiness or his comfort hung in the balance but his *life!* Only too clearly he saw that while Turner lived he would know neither safety nor happiness. Gradually the thought of the man's death became an obsession.

He had now learned a good deal about Turner. He was a passenger guard and worked on the slower trains of the main East Coast route between London and Edinburgh. His way home led him past the hotel and on several different occasions he had noticed Ranck.

Ranck now wondered if some accident could happen along the line. As he thought over it almost unconsciously a plan took shape in his mind. He would travel by one of Turner's trains. He would get him alone in his van. And then—!

It was for this purpose that with a heavy blackjack hidden under his clothes, he was now at Thorpe Station awaiting the London train. At five-thirty to the minute it came in. From previous inspection he had learnt that the dining car was the sixth from the rear and that the five coaches between it and the van were of the side corridor type, with luggage shelves and lavatories at their ends. He also knew that only one

guard was in charge: his enemy David Turner.

Unostentatiously mingling with the crowd, Ranck approached the train. He was the last to get into the coach immediately behind the dining car. There he placed his suitcase on one of the shelves, got out again, and strolled along the platform to the last coach. He climbed in, quietly entered the lavatory beside the van and bolted the door, having gripped the handles in his handkerchief. A few seconds later the train started.

From Thorpe to Selcaster, the next stop and for which Ranck held a third single, was an hour's run. During it he had counted on the corridor being clear, for at this time of year the train was seldom crowded, and the first dinner was not served till after it passed Selcaster.

At zero hour he left the lavatory and returned to the swaying vestibule. When Turner saw him he jumped up.

"Good Lord, Ranck! What are you doing here?"

"Just a word with you, Turner."

"Not here. If you're seen I'll get it in the neck."

"I won't be a minute. I've got a scheme with money in it, but it would take two to get it. Will you join me?"

This was an opening which Turner could not resist. He hesitated and Ranck drew a paper from his pocket. It bore an imaginary plan. "This house is full of valuables and empty. Not overlooked. See, here's a sketch."

As Turner grudgingly bent forward to examine the paper, Ranck struck. Turner pitched forward and lay motionless.

A wave of sheer terror swept over Ranck as he straightened up and put away his blackjack. Now he was in real danger. If a passenger were to come into the van, he was as good as hanged. He felt an overwhelming urge to rush from the place.

He fought it down. Failure to stick to his plan would mean certain disaster. He must indeed get as far from the van as possible, but not by headlong flight. That near lavatory would not be far enough, for at Selcaster porters would be grouped where the van stopped, and he might be seen leaving. Therefore he must pass unnoticed along the corridor. He had worked out how this was to be done.

He slipped the sketch into his pocket and drew on a pair of rubber gloves. Then setting his teeth, he knelt down and began to strip the uniform off the body. He found it harder than he had expected. Indeed he grew panicky, it took so long. But at last it was done.

Quickly he put on the uniform over his own clothes, coat and all. This was why he had shivered in a featherweight water-

proof. Owing to the fact that Turner was about his height, but of a sturdier build, the uniform fitted reasonably well. Indeed it was this fact of their relative sizes that had suggested his plan. With rubber pads in his cheeks and the peak of the uniform cap pulled low over his eyes, he was satisfied no one would recognize him, specially in the dimly-lit corridor.

One other precaution remained to be taken. Before leaving the van he made a space in a pile of luggage, dragged the body in, and covered it with suitcases. Discovery of the crime at Selcaster was inevitable, but not, he hoped, till he had left the station.

Having glanced quickly round to make sure he had forgotten nothing, he left the van, and summoning all his strength of will, walked in a leisurely yet businesslike way down the corridor. To his relief he met no one.

At last he reached the end of the fifth coach and drew the door to behind him. He was now in the little space containing the luggage shelves, the lavatory, and the vestibule leading to the dining car. Picking up his suitcase, he went into the lavatory. As he bolted the door some of his anxiety dropped away from him. The worst was now over and so far all had gone well.

The suitcase contained his overcoat and a hat. Having taken these out, he stripped off the guard's uniform and his rubber gloves and together with the blackjack, cap and waterproof, packed them in the case. His plan required it to be weighted, but the weight must not take up much room. He had found the very thing in an old cast-iron door from the front of the patent stove in the hall of his hotel. This door, which had been reenameled because its original surfacing had been burnt off, had been left beside the rubbish bin for the cleaning woman to take away. Ranck had protected himself here too. If its absence were noticed, it would naturally be assumed that she had taken it.

At last the train began to slacken speed and presently drew in to the platform at Selcaster. Ranck stepped out and walked off, neither dawdling nor hurrying. He reached the exit in the middle of a throng of others, handed up his ticket, and left the station. A sigh of relief burst from him. Now he was practically safe. One further precaution and he would be absolutely so.

He knew Selcaster, in fact he had prospected it for the purpose of this very expedition. He turned along the river and soon reached a suburban area and an outlying bridge. Though the wind had fallen, it remained cold and raw and there were few people on the roads.

Ranck passed on to the bridge,

which was deserted. Half way across he took a cord from his pocket, put it through the handle of the suitcase, and lowered the latter from the parapet. When it reached the water he let go one end of the cord and the suitcase sank without splash or sound.

Returning to the center of the town, he boarded a bus to Wrexborough, a town some fifteen miles along the railway to the south. There he walked about until the next rain left for London. He took a single ticket and joined it without incident.

As he sat in his third class compartment he went over what he had done. Yes, he was safe! He had left absolutely no clue whatever. No detective officer, no matter how skillful and gifted, could possibly trace him. No one knew of his association with Turner and the girl in the shop had not seen his face. Nothing could connect him with either crime.

In the subsidiary matters apart from the actual murder he had been equally circumspect. The suitcase, cap and waterproof he had bought in different shops in the East End while wearing a disguise. For his whole-day absence from London he had an adequate explanation. He had gone to his birth place, Notfield, and had there spent the day visiting hotel after hotel, asking what chances there were of a job. The reason he would give would be that his gambling debts were making life unpleasant in London, and he was considering a fresh start elsewhere. The Notfield hotel proprietors would confirm his statement, and it was unlikely that he had been noticed on the bus from Notfield to Thorpe, an hour's run taken in the late afternoon to enable him to join Turner's train.

At 9:55 the train drew into King's Cross. If challenged, Ranck would say he had come direct from Notfield, arriving at St. Pancras at 10:10. To support this theory he walked to St. Pancras, returning to the hotel after the 10:10 came in. When he had registered the time of his arrival by asking the cook for a bite of supper, he felt that his worries at long last were over.

Ranck had pitted himself against society, but unhappily for him, society in this instance was represented by Superintendent French of New Scotland Yard. For French the case began with a telephone message from the Chief Constable of Selcaster, recounting the facts and saying that as Guard Turner was a Londoner, he had decided to turn the matter over to the Yard.

"Our Inspector Cutler," he concluded, "is traveling up in the train and should be with you a little after ten."

At ten French returned to the Yard and in due course Cutler was announced. "Ah, inspector,

sit down," French greeted him. "You've had more than your share of trouble in Selcaster?"

Cutler agreed, saying that he had been instructed to make inquiries in the train, which had started as soon as they had got another guard.

French nodded. "Tell me what you did."

Cutler had begun by interviewing the dining car staff. They were positive that no one had passed through the car between Thorpe and Selcaster. Therefore the criminal's activities had been confined to the coaches following. A search of these revealing nothing helpful, Cutler had gone through the compartments, questioning passengers and taking their names. By the time this was done they were approaching King's Cross.

Several passengers had noticed that during the run a guard had walked forward along the corridor, but no one had observed him returning. The man indeed had vanished. It was further established that no traveler had been absent from his compartment for more than two or three minutes.

"A pretty problem," said French. "Well, inspector, you've got your work cut out for you. Meantime we'll look into it from this end."

French was as good as his word. During the next day or two discreet inquiries brought out a number of facts. The dead guard had lived quietly in lodgings. He had been rather unsocial, had had a doubtful reputation where money was concerned, and on the whole was not popular. But there was nothing to indicate that he had had a serious enemy.

Selcaster reported that a search for the uniform had proved fruitless. It had not been thrown out of the train nor hidden on the railway premises, nor had anyone been seen wearing it.

French had put Inspector Ludlow in charge of the London inquiry and now the two men sat talking it over. "As Turner was the only guard on the train," French was saying, "and as his uniform has vanished, it follows that the man seen walking down the corridor was wearing the uniform, and was therefore the murderer."

"Clear enough, sir."

"Something arises out of that surely? The murderer was somewhere near Turner's height and of slighter build, else he couldn't have got the uniform on over his clothes."

Ludlow slapped his thigh. "That's good, sir! It hadn't occurred to me."

"Another point," continued French. "The murderer left the train at Selcaster. We know that because there was no one in the lavatories or corridor and no

stranger entered a compartment during the journey."

"Okay, sir."

"As the uniform was not in the train, the murderer must have taken it with him. A strange guard would certainly have been noticed. Therefore he wasn't wearing it, and as he couldn't carry it over his arm, he must have packed it in something. What would he use?"

They agreed that of all receptacles, a suitcase was the most likely. So French reached the first milestone on the road to a completed case.

"A step further," he went on. "Imagine yourself guilty of the murder and carrying that uniform about with you. Would you feel happy?"

"I'd feel happier with a can of nitro-glycerine," grinned Ludlow.

"That's it, precisely. If it's found, you hang. So you'd get rid of it, at once, there in Selcaster. No waiting till you got to London. Then find the suitcase, even if it means added work for the Selcaster men."

French rang up the Selcaster Chief Constable.

"We've already got that in hand, Mr. French," was the reply. "We're going into it thoroughly. We've offered a good reward and that will make certain that we get it if an outsider finds it. We're examining areas closed to the public."

"If I may suggest it, what about rubbish disposal tips?"

"We're having all loose places dug over."

"The river?"

"There are few places he could have dropped it in unseen: a length of wharf, two bridges and so on. We're having them dragged."

French felt that he himself could have done no more. "Splendid!" he congratulated. "If it's there you'll get it."

The prophecy was soon fulfilled. Dragging operations were successful and when French reached the Yard two mornings later, he found the suitcase waiting for him. Accompanying it was a note saying that the discovery had been kept absolutely secret.

The second mile post!

The inquiry now took a different turn. French entrusted the suitcase, the waterproof and cap, the blackjack and the stove door to different officers. The first four drew blanks, but the fifth made progress.

"Find out from the makers of the stove if any similar doors were sent out as replacements during recent weeks," French directed Ludlow.

A list was soon obtained and Ludlow went round the London purchasers. In due course he visited Ranck's hotel, and there the proprietress identified the door from the shape of the bare

patch. When Ludlow found that the porter was of about Turner's height but of slighter build, that for some time he had seemed worried, and that he had had leave on the day of the murder, he felt a satisfying thrill. Leaving a man to shadow Ranck, he hurried back to the Yard.

"Good work," said French. "He's our man right enough, but we must have more proof. He'll put up some alibi for the day of the crime and we'll get him over that. Bring him in."

Since the murders Ranck had been living through a veritable nightmare. Added to the gnawing worry of his debts was now the shadow of a ceaseless fear.

When one day he entered the hotel to find two large men waiting for him, a cold weight of dread settled down on him. But they were polite, even friendly. Admitting that they were police officers, they said they thought he might be able to help them in an inquiry they were making. Would he have any objection to coming to see Superintendent French, who was handling the matter?

During the silent drive Ranck called up his reserves of courage. He had a perfect alibi. All he had to do was to steel his nerves and stick to his story.

French's beginning made the former difficult. In a serious voice he told him that the inquiry was concerned with the death of David Turner, and that he need not answer any question unless he wanted to. Then he went on: "We understand that you were absent from work on the day of the crime. Would you care to tell us where you were?"

Ranck breathed more freely.

He promptly explained that during the day he had visited hotel managers, and at a later period had had dinner in a Notfield cafe.

It seemed to go down well. French nodded, then turned to an incomprehensible side line. "Looking for a job at Notfield? I see. If you had secured one did you intend to remain on there, without any explanation to your old employer?"

Ranck didn't understand it, but he drove himself to reply promptly. "Certainly not. I'd have gone back and told him."

French nodded again. "You mean you didn't intend to stay over night?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why," French said quietly, "did you take that with you?"

As he spoke he pointed across the room and there, suddenly pushed forward into view, was the suitcase. Ranck stared at it, frozen with horror. Beneath its stained cover he seemed to see the shadowy outlines of a blackjack and a uniform.

Slowly he pitched forward in a dead faint.

good night, officer

by . . . J. A. S. Coppard

A police officer with no liking for the gruesome may find it terrifyingly thrust upon him.

ON THE night of January the nineteenth I went on duty a little earlier than usual, at about nine-thirty. I was given the beat on the south side of Webster Avenue, and the entire Clinton Park section where it runs parallel with Morton Boulevard.

I was walking toward the intersection of Dye and Thompson Streets when I happened to see a small delivery truck standing at the curb in front of Manton's furniture store. A man was sitting at the wheel. He looked about thirty years old, and was clean shaven. He had a dark complexion and black hair, and he was wearing a shabby snapbrim pulled well down over the right side of his face.

As I approached, two men in overalls crossed from the back of the truck—which had concealed them an instant before—towards the main door of the furniture shop, and entered the building, walking slowly.

On passing the truck I saw that the name on the side was "Sellmore Window Display Service." Then I saw the two men moving about in the front window of the store. They were

There's a chill fascination about wax museum reconstructions of famous crimes and criminals, despite their absolute quietude. You'll agree, we think, that J.A.S. Coppard has here made a window dresser's dummy assume a deadlier role.

rearranging chairs, tables and a couch, and appeared to have a liking for the job.

I stopped to watch them. They were working with the window lights on and I could see them clearly. One of them was about the same age as the driver of the truck and apparently he liked to talk. The other was considerably younger and he hardly spoke at all.

Interested, I moved up closer.

After a few minutes the first man left the window and came out into the street where I was standing. He said, "Evening, officer."

I replied, "How do you do, sir."

"How does it look?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "I'm afraid I'm not a very good judge of advertising appeal, sir. But it looks all right to me."

During the conversation I was able to see, through the back of the window, a light burning in the private office at the rear of the store. I could also see the outline of Mr. Manton himself, against the frosted glass partition. He was seated at his desk at work on the firm's books, but there was nothing unusual about that. I happened to know that it was also normal for the Sellmore Window Display Service to rearrange Manton's windows twice a month. A busy cop on a busy beat learns a good deal about the people he's paid to protect.

I glanced at the contents of the truck through the open door. In its rear section, which was lit by a small electric overhead light there was a shop-window mannequin covered with a white sheet, a short metal stepladder, a number of large square boxes painted gray, five cans of paint, two wax heads packed in a cardboard carton, and a jumble of odds and ends which I suppose every window dresser needs at times—or thinks he needs.

I forgot to mention before that when I first approached the truck I saw the man sitting at the wheel give a signal to the two in the window.

The man who spoke to me later returned to the window with a small whiskbroom which he obtained from the truck, and I decided I'd seen enough. He waved his hand to me from inside the window as I moved away, and I distinctly saw his lips form the words, "Good night, officer."

I didn't wave in reply.

A short distance down the street I crossed to a drug store and went into a telephone booth from which I could see the men in the window and the truck. I dialed the number of Manton's furniture store. I heard the phone ringing and I saw the men getting ready to leave the store. But there was no answer to the

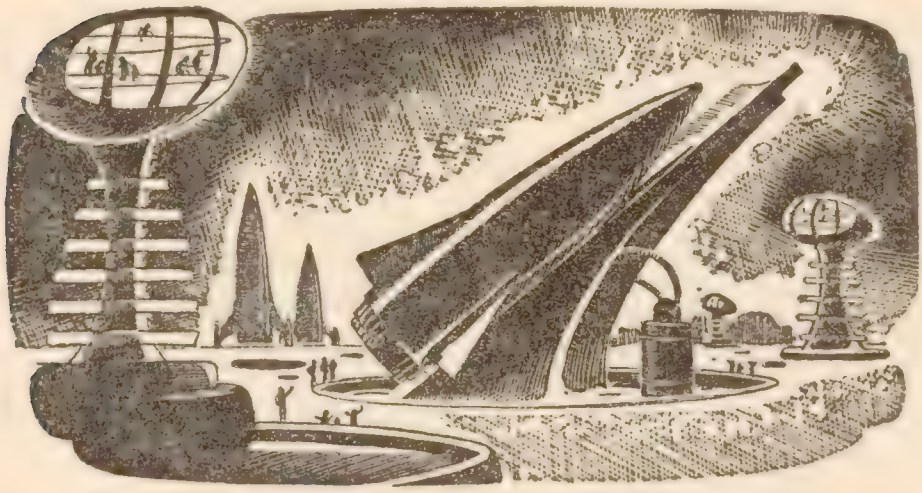
call—and the telephone at Manton's is in the office at the elbow of Mr. Manton.

I replaced the receiver and dialed the number again. There was still no reply. I saw that the two men were leaving the shop. They pulled the door shut behind them on a spring lock.

Then I dialed my precinct number. After getting through I went to the truck and arrested the three men, aided by the patrol car which answered my call.

On investigation it was found that the figure of Mr. Manton in the office was a window dresser's dummy and the dummy in the truck was the body of Mr. Manton who had been brutally slugged and his safe rifled.

My suspicions had been aroused when I had first glanced into the back of the truck. The fingers of one hand were showing beyond the sheet covering the supposed dummy, and it was the first time I had seen a dummy with nicotine-stained fingernails.



If by a tragic oversight—engineered, you can be sure, by some malicious elf with designs on your reading pleasure entertainment—you haven't yet made the acquaintance of THE SAINT'S *companion magazine,* FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, *now is the time to send the interlopers scurrying. For in the December issue, now on sale, is a science fantasy novelette with a golden key attached to it. It's called* CONAN, MAN OF DESTINY, *and the key has been fashioned by L. Sprague de Camp and Robert E. Howard to unlock portals of wonder and surmise with an irresistible appeal to mystery lovers everywhere. And there are stories as well by such science fantasy greats as Arthur Sellings, F. B. Bryning, Arthur Porges, Robert F. Young, and a round robin of other names as deservedly famous.*

who's buying murder?

by . . . William Campbell Gault

Stock's many fights had failed to win him the title. So he entered a racket as vicious as a cobra's stare, and left it — stark mad!

HE HAD a badly battered face, and one eye was sightless—the result of a second who'd been careless with the Monsell's. The skin around this eye was puckered and drawn, giving him a stomach-unsettling look of quizzical contempt. In his ring days, he'd been known as The Spoiler.

He'd been that, all right. He'd killed Joey Zeller in the ring at Amarillo and many a hopeful had hung up the gloves after a go with him. His legal name was Arthur Stock, and women and liquor had stopped him just short of the title. His appetite for women was enormous, his approach brutal.

After the big fights had come the little fights and then the careless handler and no fights. No money either, or any particular reason to live.

He had worked out a new pitch. He'd come into one of the crummy bars along Central, stand at one end of the bar and scowl like the walking gargoyle that he was. Then he'd say, "Who's buyin'?"

Made justifiably reckless by a Mystery Writers of America Edgar *award William Campbell Gault has successfully taken on all comers in the big-circulation pocket-book arena. So spectacular has been his rise through title after title that we've found ourselves wondering if such golden-glove champions as John MacDonald and William McGivern may not soon have to look to their laurels. And here, newly-minted for your delight, is a free-swinging Gault mystery chiller of novelette length, with a death-wears-a-mask quality.*

Always, in the downcast, the outcast, the half-caste at these joints there'd be a few who accepted it more as a challenge than a question. He wasn't a man you'd want to say "no" to.

It worked. So he had liquor and food from free-lunch counters and a bed wherever and whenever his feet got tired of supporting him. No women, of course. But that deprivation he regarded as temporary.

One rainy January night, in *Cully's Cut-rate Corner Bar,* he asked the inevitable question—and nothing happened. It was wet, outside, and Cully's patrons had been out in it. They were too miserable to have any room for fear. So nobody looked at him; they all looked at their drinks. Nobody, that is, except one man at the far end of the bar who wasn't one of the usual habitues.

He was quietly dressed in black and he looked quietly at Spoiler, and to Spoiler's addled mind there was some black in the glance, too. Not young, not old, the face pinkly white above the black suit, the eyes measuring Spoiler like one of those noodle docs. It was a long face, and grave.

Spoiler fretted under the cool glance and made the man his target. "Hey, you, at the end," he called out. "You an undertaker?"

The man smiled with his lips. "You hear what I said about the drink?"

The man nodded.

Under the bar, Cully's hand groped for his bludgeon. He was determined not to have any trouble in his place. So long as the Spoiler's question brought additional purchases, he wouldn't interfere. But trouble was something else again.

The Spoiler didn't miss the gesture. Though he didn't fear Cully, or anybody else—with or without a club—he didn't want his pitch to die out.

So his voice was milder. "Well, then, are you buyin'?"

The man nodded. "Of course. I'm waiting for you to come down here. If I buy a man a drink, I don't expect him to be ashamed of my company."

Cully released his grip on the club, the men at the bar stopped holding their breaths, and Spoiler shuffled to the far end.

"What will it be?" the man said.

From the palmy days, Spoiler remembered a name, a name that might help regain some of the moment's lost prestige. He said, "A Martini. Dry."

The man smiled. Cully stared. Spoiler smirked.

Finally, Cully said, "I got some mixed. Bottled stuff. That all right?"

Spoiler sniffed, and nodded.

The man said, "I guess it will have to do."

Spoiler wondered why he had not thought of voicing it like that.

There was a lot of alcohol, and some talk. About how tough times were for the Spoiler, for a man who'd been up there, with the money boys. In common with members of the human race, Spoiler never tired of talking about himself.

And that's how The Spoiler went to work for Armand—and became G.I. Joe, in a spurious sense on the high road to infamy.

The lad he impersonated was dead, of course, a sensitive boy in the Joyce Kilmer tradition. They'd put a rifle in his hand and told him to go out and kill, or be killed. He was killed—and now he was impersonated by Spoiler.

The Spoiler's new friend—Armand—had the files on all dead soldiers' buddies. His new friend had a uniform and grease paint and an elaborate set-up of lights and an inter-communication system. The uniform was torn and there were streaks of blood, here and there, and it had been tailored for Spoiler in the casual way the lads wore them.

Most operators with his new friend's genius for deception use an Indian guide — Laughing Springs or Wishful Wisteria, or something of the sort. Particularly the fat women operators who can swallow a yard of cheesecloth. Ectoplasm, that is. They cherish little girl Indian guides with braided hair.

Armand was brilliant in his own peculiarly vicious way. A lot of boys had died and a lot of gullible relatives had money. It takes a soldier to tell a soldier's story. Spoiler was their guide. With the face of a club fighter, and the heart of a poet and the husky voice of all the boys who had died, wondering.

The face was doctored some, and there was a gauze screen to dull the view. But the eye, where the bullet had entered, was almost untouched. G.I. Joe. Spoiler. *Who's buyin'?*

They bought. This was a big town, and the files were here, and Armand was a careful, thoughtful, persuasive man.

Maybe, he's worth a paragraph or two.

It was not always thus, with Armand. His mother had told him he'd been "born with the veil," and his mother had had some success with tea leaves and cards herself. She convinced him he had "The Power."

The night Armand's father died—and he died a thousand miles from home — Armand heard three distinct knocks on the rear door and went screaming into his mother's room. He could, with about seventy percent accuracy, foretell who was on the other end of the wire when the phone rang. With the ESP cards,

he rated about nine out of the twenty-five, which is high.

But when the spiritualist supply houses had an almost inexhaustible supply of convincing and contrived gadgets, and detailed spook clearing house files of the dead and when the world was so full of sentimental fools, *rich* sentimental fools . . .

We make our own monsters.

The home and seance room of the gifted Armand was on the top floor of the Esta Calabar, and that's an expensive place. You don't maintain it on card tricks, not even ESP card tricks. It took organization, and organization he had.

Now Armand had the Spoiler —a really lucky thought, that had been.

They went over a list of the old regulars first, the ones who actually begged to be taken. The first grouping—Mrs. Sylvester Nero, Mrs. Rutherford Dutcher, old Colonel Devons, the "colonel" a courtesy title only.

The seance took place in the quiet, weird-blue room of Armand, with the distant wind-from-the-lonely-hills sound track in the background, so quiet it seemed to come from within the mind. With just the wind sound and the blue light dimming and the darkened receiving corner beginning to get lighter, while to one side of it, in a heavy, carved chair, sat Armand.

His face was deathly pale, his brown eyes closed. So clean and decent and sincere he looked and just a glance would have convinced anyone that he had the *Power.*

Listen to his voice, though his lips are not moving: "There has been in my world these past two weeks a new force, a new guide, a new revelation. He is a friend to all those gallant men who died so that we might live."

A pause. Then, still motionless, Armand goes on: "His name was Private Joe Ellers and he was attached to the One Dash Infantry when the North Koreans made their counter attack which started at midnight. He was shot through the left eye and died instantly."

More dates, more names of places and commanding officers and then the darkness gathers around the chair and the corner light attracts the eye. Into clear view comes Spoiler, uniform, blood, rifle, and all, his good eye heavenward where the illuminated words run in the cove which conceals them from his viewers.

In the small room behind the corner the operator taps out the words on a letter-frame curiously like the keyboard of a typewriter.

Colonel Devons says hoarsely, "My nephew, Walter—"

Spoiler reads slowly, his husky voice sounding sincere because of his stumbling mind. "Walter says, I watch my children grow.

My darling Susan must know I am at peace, awaiting her. Though she may marry again, she will never belong to anyone but me."

Darling Susan had been left nearly a million by the deceased Walter, and had long been a goal of Armand's. He was abetted in this by the Colonel, who had a sentimentalist's revulsion for a dead hero's widow remarrying.

Now it is Mrs. Sylvester Nero who says with an unseen blush, "There is a name I've never mentioned here, or anywhere else for the past twelve years. It is the name of a man, Allison Dering. He was a major, and he was killed in the second year of the war."

Little does Mrs. Sylvester Nero know how astoundingly complete are Armand's files. Reads Spoiler, "On the day he died the word on his lips was—Mary. There is a letter written by Major Dering before the enemy attacked. It has not been delivered. The major saw his death take shape. He knew—"

Armand had wanted to use the word "premonition," but knew it would only have confused Spoiler.

Shocked, thrilled, Mrs. Sylvester Mary Nero asks, "A letter? Why was it not delivered?"

"The one he entrusted it to also died. His brother who received his—his effects, does not know. I will seek him through his dead companion. I will learn his name."

Armand was shrewdly aware that a letter like that would have a high monetary value. Mrs. Nero was at an age when there was joy to be had in living with a beautiful memory, a tangible keepsake. They were less wearing than husbands.

Mrs. Dutcher had nothing to ask, but her evening was by no means fruitless. So Mary *had* been carrying Al Dering in her heart all those years. Fodder for her garden club.

II

After they'd left, in the living room of Armand's apartment, the vultures gathered. Armand and Spoiler and Ruth Gabriel who ran the keyboard, and a former bit movie actor named Phil Desert. Handsome, this Philip—and indispensable to Armand.

Armand said to him, "A fat character part for you, my lad. You'll be the brother of the message carrier. A hard, mercenary man who demands money for the letter."

Philip frowned in protest. "Mrs. Nero knows me well, Armand."

"I know. But there will be an intermediary—hired. She will hear your voice on the phone—a gruff, suspicious voice. I will see that Mrs. Nero hires the proper intermediary."

Ruth said, "Even if you had to come face to face with her, you could carry it off, Phil." Ruth thought Phil could do anything.

Spoiler sat in the corner with a drink in his hand, a disturbing uneasiness gnawing at him. It wasn't because he was among his superiors. Spoiler was always among his superiors. It was from inside, like a—a voice.

"And," Armand said, turning with a smile toward Spoiler, "what do you think of our new dramatic discovery?"

Spoiler frowned, and said nothing for a long moment. Then he said, "Would it be all right, boss, if I took a little walk? Sort of made the rounds?"

Armand looked at him doubtfully.

"I ain't getting out of line," Spoiler assured him. "I wouldn't leave no gold mine."

Armand smiled. "All right. You've done a fine job, tonight."

Spoiler wiped off the grease paint and donned his former clothes and went out into the night. Seventh son of a seventh son—though he didn't know it.

Tonight, when he'd stood there, like some lousy statue, why had he thought of Joey Zeller, who'd died in Amarillo, under Spoiler's fists? Why had he heard the voice of Joey? You'd think he—the Spoiler—was punchy, or something.

Children can start fires, playing with matches.

In Cully's, there were five at the bar, immersed in their own sodden dreams. Cully looked up and nodded and went back to the *Racing Form.*

Spoiler's big left hand rested on the bar and his voice was out of the grave. "Who's buyin'?"

Four out of the five bought.

Whiskey burned in Spoiler and he was a big, big man again, inferior to none.

Joey Zeller and he had been friends, two of a kind. The death of Joey hadn't been arranged. Nor had the stiff right hand that had almost shattered Spoiler's jaw. Enraged, Spoiler had waded in.

And Joey had died.

Whiskey burned in Spoiler and he saw his mother's face, thin and weary-eyed, and heard her defeated voice. "There aren't none of them going to amount to anything. Only you, Arthur. You got to fight for what you want in this world."

He'd taken her literally.

Whiskey burned in Spoiler and the gag grew tiresome, and he took a cab back to Armand's.

The room Armand had given him was small but clean and the bed soft. He slept, and—he dreamed.

"A bad deal," Joey told him. "This Wilkinson is a *right* guy. He's aces."

Joey had stood in one corner of the ring, telling him that.

Spoiler woke at ten, his mouth

full of decaying feathers, wondering who the hell was Wilkinson?"

Armand and Ruth were having breakfast at the table on the terrace. Spoiler sat down and asked, "You know a guy named Wilkinson?"

Armand looked up quickly. "I certainly do. Did you meet him, last night?"

"In a way, I heard about him. I dreamed about him. A guy I killed in Amarillo, he told me about him. I wouldn't lie to you about it."

Now they both stared at him. Ruth looked uncomfortable.

Armand said, "Start at the beginning, Spoiler."

"There ain't none, really," Spoiler protested. "Only when I was standing under them lights, with that suit on, I started to think of Joey. It was an accident, Amarillo was. Last night I'm dreaming Joey is standing in the ring. He says, 'Wilkinson is right. He's aces.' "

Armand said quietly, "Are you sure this isn't one of your gags, Spoiler? I know how you love a gag."

"So help me," Spoiler said. "I can't help what I dream."

Armand understood that. Armand had some dreams, too, from time to time.

Armand said to Ruth, "We must have mentioned Wilkinson yesterday, and the name stayed with him."

Ruth believed that because she wanted to.

To Spoiler, Armand said, "John Wilkinson is a thorn in our flesh, Spoiler, a fly in our ointment. He's in love with Susan Devons."

"Is he a right guy?" Spoiler asked.

Armand nodded and smiled at Spoiler. "But we're wrong guys. Do you see what I mean?"

Spoiler grinned knowingly.

Armand buttered a piece of toast with care. "I'd appreciate hearing any dreams you may have, Spoiler. They're very interesting."

Spoiler wasn't listening. He was wolfing his eggs and keeping the corner of his good eye on the dark beauty of Ruth Gabriel. He smiled every time her disturbed glance came his way. He was getting to her, he knew; all women were nuts about fighters. But she was playing it coy.

She left the table without finishing her coffee.

Under a parasol on the bright terrace, Armand now dozed, his mind on Susan Devons, and the letter that had to be prepared for Mrs. Nero. There were letters the major had written—any capable forger could handle that part. But he'd have to be paid well.

Spoiler went into the bedroom to re-read some of his comic books, but he got the jeebies reading them and presently he

stretched himself out on his cot. In a little while, there was a knock, and Spoiler said hopefully, "Come in."

It was Armand.

"You're restless," Armand said. "You've nothing to do, have you?"

"I'm not kicking," Spoiler said suspiciously.

"I know." Armand sat down in the room's lone chair. "We're more alike than you might think, Spoiler. I trust you completely."

Spoiler regarded him quietly. "Thanks."

"I thought," Armand said casually, "you might want to put your time to better use. And make a few extra dollars in the process."

"I can always use a buck."

"It's a little bit of business," Armand explained. "You'll get a room in a cheap lodging house I've chosen and wait there for a man. The man will bring you five thousand dollars and you'll give him a letter. That's all there is to it."

Spoiler nodded, and considered the ceiling. "I thought that was going to be Phil Desert's pitch."

"He's afraid of it. He's no man to get out on a limb. There are risks, of course."

"But you're the boss. How can he say 'no' to you?"

"He's just said it for the last time," Armand said. His voice was dreamy. "I'm afraid we're going to have to get rid of Phil."

Spoiler thought of the way Ruth looked at Phil, and smiled. He made a gesture with his forefinger across his throat.

Armand shook his head. "Something more subtle. You see, Phil not only refused to do this, he's fallen in love with Susan Devons. Or perhaps with her money. With a million dollars involved, we certainly don't want Phil to go in business for himself, do we, Spoiler?"

"You've got a point," Spoiler agreed. "When do I check in at the flea bag?"

III

He moved in that morning. It was a two-story frame house near Walnut, and he paid a week's rent in advance, though he intended to use the place only for a day.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, the shamus showed up.

He was a big man, with a broken nose, wearing a cheap suit and the odor of cheap cigars.

"Jack Havest?" he wanted to know.

Spoiler nodded.

The shamus had a bundle with him. He came in to stand in the center of the bleak room. "Have I not seen you before, somewhere?" he asked, suspiciously.

"In the movies," Spoiler said. "Is that the dough?" He nodded toward the package.

"Right." The man frowned.

"I could swear I know you. Is this another one of Armand's pitches?"

Spoiler was getting annoyed. "Who the hell's Armand?"

The man was silent, studying Spoiler. Finally he said: "I'm a bonded and licensed operative, understand? I can't get mixed up with anything fishy."

Spoiler looked at him and laughed.

"Look, Monkey," the man said, and took a step forward.

Spoiler didn't wait to see the man's intentions. He threw a right hand for the button, and caught the shamus as he collapsed.

In one limp hand, Spoiler put the letter. Then he took the bundle of currency and went to the door. For a moment, behind the shamus on the floor, he thought he saw the figure and face of Joey Zeller. It looked like Joey was shaking his head.

Back at the Esta Calabar, he explained to Armand what he'd done.

"Maybe I jumped the gun, huh?" Spoiler asked.

"It doesn't matter," Armand said, reassuringly. "I'll fix it up." He smiled. "He made a mistake, threatening you, didn't he?"

"He sure did, boss. A lousy private dick."

Joey Zeller had followed him home. When Spoiler went into his room, it was dim, and there was Joey, in the corner again.

"You're a set-up," Joey said. "This Armand's making a patsy out of you, Spoiler. You're riding for a fall."

"Ah, blow it," Spoiler said. "You're punchy, Joey."

Hell, Joey was more than that; Joey was dead!

"That's right, *dead,*" Joey whispered. "Like you're going to be, before this swami gets through with you. It's no fun being dead, Spoiler, not for guys like us."

Spoiler picked up a pillow and threw it at the corner. Joey melted, smiling. There was an acrid, musty odor in the room.

Spoiler sat down on the bed and looked at his trembling hands.

He had a shower before dinner, and ate his dinner with Phil Desert.

The actor said, "Ruth and Armand have gone out to eat. Pariahs, we are, Spoiler."

Spoiler stared at him.

Desert's glance was steady. "Has Armand been talking to you," he asked.

"Is that against the law?" Spoiler grunted.

Desert shrugged. "It depends upon what he said. It might even be slanderous." A smile and a sip of water.

Spoiler chewed his baked ham until Desert spoke again. "You're an intelligent man, Spoiler. Don't get on the wrong side."

Spoiler looked up pugnacious-

ly. "You got something to say, say it. Don't beat around the bush."

"Right. Armand has a police record as long as your kayo record. Everything from watered stock to cotton Oriental rugs. If there's trouble, the first man the police grab for is the man with a record. Am I right?"

"I'm listening."

"Armand needed me. I knew certain fairly influential people, and he used me to wangle an introduction to them. Now Armand doesn't need me any more. I know too much for him to just —fire me. I don't intend to go out without a fight. I've prepared for this time."

Spoiler sniffed.

"You don't believe me?"

"How about that millionaire dame?" Spoiler asked. "That your ace?"

"Armand has talked to you, then. She's my ace. She's a little more than that. Susan Devon's my cousin, Spoiler. We grew up together."

Spoiler stared at him. "Armand said you—Say, is this the McCoy?"

"That's the gospel. Armand's dealt in deception so long he's careless with his lies. Or maybe he thought you and I were natural enemies, Spoiler. Maybe he thought we'd never compare notes."

"Maybe." Spoiler dug at a shred of meat caught between his front teeth. "And what's your angle?"

"None. A man's stomach can take so much. When his degradation spreads to his family—well, I'm pulling out. But I'm protecting Susan, too."

Spoiler laughed. "For a minute, I thought you were making sense. I'll stick with the brains in this outfit."

Phil Desert said nothing.

Spoiler wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You said one thing that was right, Desert. We're natural enemies, all right."

"That makes two enemies," Desert said evenly. "Because that private detective you struck is going to be another one. Armand took the chance two hot-heads like you might have words. Now he's got a patsy, if things go wrong. He can always throw you to the law."

Desert stood up, started to add something, and evidently changed his mind. He went out onto the terrace.

From somewhere, somebody said, "Sucker. You don't know a friend when you see one. You never did."

There was no one in sight, but the voice had been Joey Zeller's.

IV

The colonel was there, again, that night. He was one of an audience of two. The other per-

son was a female, a woman of about thirty, blonde and with a clean, fresh complexion and a perfectly-shaped mouth.

She was Susan Devons. In the operations room, Spoiler looked through the one-way glass and heard her voice through the quiet speaker. It was a husky, pleasant voice.

She said, "John wouldn't come. He doesn't know I'm here. I—I promised him I wouldn't come, but Uncle Richard was so insistent."

"If you don't feel right about it," Armand said soothingly, "we can forget you were here. I've no desire to re-create an image that might prove painful. You read the books your uncle brought you?"

She nodded. "I'm not too bright, Armand. They seemed to make a strong case for your—your beliefs. But John was forever punching holes in them. He said that none of the mystics involved ever delivered under test conditions."

"And no saint ever canonized achieved his state without faith. Revelations are not for the cynical, Mrs. Devons." Armand paused with the supreme indifference of the artist. "Perhaps you'd rather not go on with this."

"I came to see," she said simply. "I came to judge for myself."

The vision of Ruth Gabriel dimmed in Spoiler's mind as he gazed on the fresh beauty of Susan Devons. Ruth came into the control room a moment later, but he scarcely glanced at her.

"Arthur," she said, and it took him a second to recognize his name. He looked at her. "What's happening between Armand and Phil?" she said.

Spoiler shrugged, pretending not to understand. "Something's wrong?" he asked.

Her eyes tried to read his face. "Don't you know?"

"They don't tell me nothing."

"Nor me," she said, "but the way Armand was talking, at dinner tonight—"

Spoiler said, "Maybe Phil Desert is nuts about this Susan, huh?"

"Susan Devons is his cousin. Didn't Armand tell you?"

"He told me nothing," Spoiler said quickly. "She's the kind of dame any guy would be nuts about, though. Class, huh?"

"I never noticed," Ruth said. "Well, I've the script. I see they're about ready."

Tonight Spoiler saw the reason for the negatives and the projector.

In the carved chair, Armand was a black-clothed statue, his eyes closed. "Joe Ellers, Joe Ellers—Private Joe Ellers—"

Dimly seen, Spoiler tonight. The light diffused, in blurred outline, G.I. Joe Ellers. There had been a real Joe Ellers who'd died in Korea. No relatives, no

one to mourn. Armand was careful about things like that.

Armand said: "There is a man we seek, Lieutenant Walter Devons. You spoke of him last night, Joe Ellers."

Spoiler, his eye reading the cove's script replied: "There is no rank where we are. Walter Devons asks if Susan remembers Lake Talon and the promises we made each other there?"

Susan flinches. The files of Armand are complete, for he is a careful man.

Spoiler said: "Walter is troubled. Walter's love is constant and he wants to know was Susan's love only physical? Does she remember the Bachelor Ball, and the weekend at Cape Island? Has she forgotten the porch at Lake Talon? Walter is troubled, and trying to break through—"

Now, Spoiler turns his head a trifle, as though trying to see the image to his right.

The image to his right is dim, but unmistakable, wavering, but there is no doubt. It is the image of Walter Devons. A gasp from Susan, and inarticulate sounds from her parched, tight throat—and she slumps forward. Colonel Devons catches her before she hits the floor.

Back in the control room, Ruth Gabriel is white and staring.

Spoiler, for the moment, is thoughtful. Spoiler had spent seven months in a training camp before even the army had given up on him. But hate it though he had, every disciplined, prearranged second of it, he still remembered the guys. It was the damnedest thing, how the guys stayed with him.

Susan Devons is coming around; Armand has brought her a glass of water.

V

Ruth said quietly, "It looks like my script was successful." She looked at Spoiler thoughtfully. "The switch has started."

He turned from watching Susan Devons.

"Switch?" he asked.

She paused, and then, "From you as intermediary to Walter, directly. Soon Armand may not need you any more, either."

"First Desert, now you," Spoiler said. "What is this? Are you organizing a union or something?"

Her laugh was bitter. "That might have been a good idea."

He watched her walk out.

Through the speaker, he heard Susan say, "I have to believe, now. I have faith, Armand."

Spoiler went to his room. He took off the uniform and looked at it a second before hanging it up. He put on his other clothes, and went out the back way.

What a dame, that Susan. What an innocent, straight looking dame. What a guy, that Armand.

Fog was coming in from the west as Spoiler headed for the bus stop. The small coupe that had been parked near the alley started up, after Spoiler got on the bus. It followed the bus.

At Cully's there were only three patrons, and those far gone. There was no vigor in Spoiler's, "Who's buyin'?"

There was no response, so finally Cully said, "Okay, Spoiler, I guess the house can pop once a year." He put a double shot out.

Spoiler didn't gulp it. He rolled it in his mouth, trying to get the bad taste from his tongue. Behind him, the door opened, and a man came in. But Spoiler didn't turn.

"I'm buying," the man said.

Magic words! The remnants of four drinks went down in a second and all eyes turned toward the newcomer, including Spoiler's.

It was the shamus. The gent with the broken nose and cheap suit, with the odor of cheap cigars.

He was grinning. "*Jack Havest.* I should have recognized you, Spoiler. Especially after that right hand."

"You shouldn't have come for me," Spoiler said. "I wasn't going to smack you till you came for me."

"A man makes all kinds of mistakes in a lifetime," the shamus said. "That was just one of the many. What are you drinking, Spoiler?"

"Anything free," Spoiler said.

The shamus must have been loaded. He continued to buy. Spoiler's legs got that rubbery feeling, but the old brain continued to hum. He had an automatic guard that came up around cops.

Some time later, the shamus said, "I told you I was licensed and bonded, Spoiler, and I think Armand's trying to stick me with something, or maybe you."

Spoiler shook his head. "Union talk, again."

"What's that—?"

"Nothin'."

"But as I said," the shamus went on, "I'm licensed and bonded, and right with the law in this town. And there's been a murder."

Very quiet, this last sentence, so the others wouldn't hear.

Spoiler looked at the man with the broken nose. "Who?" he asked, suspicion strong in his husky voice.

"Phil Desert."

Spoiler remembered Armand's, *I'm afraid we're going to have to get rid of Phil.*

The shamus said, "You don't want any part of murder, do you, Spoiler?"

Spoiler studied the man. Phil with the first cross, and Ruth with the double, and this would make the triple. But Spoiler, in his ring career, had gone as far as the quintuple-cross.

After a few seconds, he said, "Phil Desert's dead? You ain't lying to me?" His vision dulled and he thought he saw Joey, beyond the detective's shoulder—Joey, sadly shaking his head.

"Come on," the shamus said. "I want to show you something. I want to prove what happens to the boys Armand doesn't need."

Spoiler went with the shamus, the licensed, bonded man.

The fog drifted around the coupe, shrouded the street lights, dulled the sound of the motor. To Walnut Street, and the two story frame rooming house Spoiler had waited in, that afternoon.

Up the worn carpet of the stairs, to the same room. The detective went in first, and turned on a dim light.

On the floor, his eyes open and staring unseeingly up at the ceiling, lay the body of Philip Desert. The final curtain for actor Philip Desert. There was blood all over his face, as though he'd been fighting a prelim in a cheap club.

Spoiler's legs were shakier than ever, and he turned to face the shamus. He turned too late. The sap in the detective's hand caught him flush on the forehead, and Spoiler's legs started to cave. He felt the second impact, but not the third.

Enough to put a man away for hours, enough to kill a man, swung with all that force behind it. But Spoiler had been hit so often. From Newark to Frisco, from Miami to St. Paul, in a hundred rings in a hundred fights and more, Spoiler had been hit by experts.

The light revolved, and there was Joey Zeller.

Joey said, "He's a licensed and bonded man. His story, backed by Armand's, with names like Devons and Nero and Dutcher to help out, puts you right in the middle of the chair, Spoiler. I'll be seeing you, boy."

The light grew dim, the table lamp, it was, and Joey grew dim, too. Spoiler couldn't make his lips work, but he thought, "I've been a sucker."

"As usual," Joey agreed.

Spoiler's groping hand came out and found the leg of the bed. He tried to pull himself up, and Joey came over to help. Even Spoiler knew then that he was punchy.

He hung onto the high iron head of the bed, his brain screaming. Joey stood not two feet away, facing him. Spoiler asked him, "How about this Wilkinson? That would be the only guy. You know where I can get to him?"

Joey said nothing.

Spoiler looked at him suspiciously. "Look, Joey, you should not have thrown that right hand. That was an accident, my slugging into you. You shouldn't have made me mad. I never had

it in for you, Joey. We were pals."

Joey said nothing.

Spoiler took a firmer grip on the bed post. "I rented this room, Joey, this afternoon. The landlady will remember me. You don't want me to burn, Joey. This John Wilkinson—I've got to—"

"The right guys," Joey said. "Only when your neck's in the noose you want to deal with the right guys. You're one of a million, Spoiler, one of a billion. You've got no break coming."

"Maybe not," Spoiler said, and then the cunning born of the hundred fights and more came to his aid. "But how about that Susan babe, and how about this Wilkinson? Maybe they'll move you up a notch, Joey, for helping people like that. You can help them, through me."

Joey looked at him a long time and said, "Follow me."

Into the fog again—the man who shouldn't even be alive, the number of times he'd been hit, especially this last one. Following a fog through the fog, a fog that was Joey Zeller, deceased.

One foot, then the other, the brain like a toothache, but this Spoiler, whatever his faults, had never been a quitter.

They came at last to a big home among big homes, a single light in the downstairs. A dim light was on over the door, gleaming yellow in the fog, and Joey led him up the drive to the front steps, and stood there.

"So long, Spoiler. There's the bell. I'll be seeing you, some day. Don't forget to duck." The image of Joey Zeller melted into the fog.

The man who answered the bell was tall, with wide shoulders, and stiff blond hair cut short and with something of a fighter's stubborn courage in his virile face.

"John Wilkinson?" Spoiler asked.

The man's face was slack in amazement. "Right. My God, what's happened to you?"

"Spoiler's my name, and they're trying to frame me." He put a hand on the door jamb for support. "I worked for Armand. I was Joe Ellers. But he's had Phil Desert killed, and he's trying to frame me for it. Get to that Ruth Gabriel. She'll crack. She's ready to crack."

Then Spoiler fell forward on his face.

EVERYTHING was always white, every time he came alive for a few minutes. Guys in white coats and the walls white and the spread on the bed white.

He'd hear a word, here and there. "The Gabriel girl's cracked. You should see the equipment he had . . . That private detective is trying to worm out of it, claiming Armand did the killing. But it was only Armand's

orders, the shamus was the arm—"

One day Spoiler opened his eyes and Susan Devons was there, with John Wilkinson. "We came to thank you," Susan said. "You've saved my sanity."

But who'd saved Spoiler's, such as it was?

Maybe it doesn't matter. The place he's in now has lots of interesting characters, and Spoiler made new friends. There's the man who won the battle of Bull Run and the guy who invented television. He's in with the mild ones, and they have a lot of freedom. They can sit in the sun and lie to each other.

Sometimes, though, at dinner, they can't figure out this Arthur Stock, who'd been lightweight, middleweight, and heavyweight champ, all in the same year.

Spoiler will slap the dining table and leer down the row of wondering faces. Spoiler will look like the Spoiler of old, and ask, "Who's buyin'?"

Even in this more rational world Spoiler is living in, they can't figure out that one.

An astounding sleuthing triumph is scored by the famed Albert Campion, as murder most dire hovers on vicious vulture wings over an old gentleman's ninetieth birthday

THE OLD MAN IN THE WINDOW

By MARGERY ALLINGHAM

Santa Claus takes a dim view of crime in holiday apparel and the wicked deeds of a thief without a conscience—in a Christmas mystery breathtakingly unusual

A PRESENT FOR CHRISTMAS

By ROBERT ARTHUR

in the next issue

in the ditch

by . . . Philip G. Chadwick

When two parties seek the same loot — safecracking is unwise!

THERE WAS nothing clever about Dan Wheeler, nothing subtle. When people read about one of his robberies—with no previous knowledge of him, of course—they said, "The guy's smart!"

But actually his "smartness" was nothing but common-sense caution backed up by a crude determination to make each robbery pay off and let nothing stand in the way.

If an unexpected night watchman appeared, Wheeler did not hesitate to slug him with the first object at hand. He once set fire to a building solely to aid his escape. But he was always cautious in his daring.

For example, when he saw that the small safe at Perry's was going to be a tougher job than he had anticipated, he took the safe itself and with the aid of Red Gleason and Jim Haley carried it down to the back yard to their waiting car. He figured it would be simpler and safer to drill a hole through it out in the open than to stay indoors breaking the lock.

So there the safe was in the back of the car with Gleason

No lawbreaker, be he ever so ruthless, is completely immune to the spinning shafts which Fate can hurl at him with chuckles derisively ironic. Philip G. Chadwick here shows us how tragically devastating such shafts can be.

steadying it and Wheeler driving. The robbery at Perry's was no ordinary take-what-comes job. They had studied it all out in advance. All of Perry's recent profits were in it. When the clerks in the outer office heard about it in the morning they would say, "The guy's smart!" and others would add, "Damned smart!" But he wasn't at all. This was merely a small example of his determination to get what he wanted even if it meant cracking a few skulls.

The skull of the man at the road side was already sufficiently smashed up to make his survival very doubtful.

They came on him around a right-angled bend where the elbow was mostly mud and Wheeler slowed down almost to walking pace to avoid a bad skid.

The man at the roadside apparently had not slowed. His badly wrecked car was mostly sticking out of a ditch beneath a broken wall, but portions were distributed about the road—a fender here, and a broken wheel there.

He lay partly under the car, a crumpled, scarcely noticeable figure until he raised one hand and called feebly. The other arm was limp, and his legs were pinioned.

Haley was half way out of the car before Wheeler's big muscular hand caught his jacket and yanked him back.

"He's not our concern," snarled Wheeler. "Someone else will pick him up. We'd be crazy to go to a hospital with *that* in the back of our car!"

"We could do something."

"Don't argue. We've got to keep moving."

There was determination in Haley's eyes. Wheeler relaxed his hold on the gear shift just long enough to lean over and land a hard right to the stubborn fool's jaw so that he fell back cursing into his seat. The wheels took a grip, rolled, and the car shot forward into the night.

The white face of the dying man peered after them, his twisted lips muttering inaudibly.

They opened the safe in the middle of a big field down a long, bumpy side road, half a mile from the nearest habitation. It took them the best part of two hours and Wheeler was in an ugly temper long before it was done. Haley had forgotten all about the man in the ditch, and Gleason was nearly weeping through weariness.

When the hole was big enough for Wheeler's fist to go through there were a lot of ledgers and other books in the way and the aperture had to be enlarged before they could be taken out. It meant that nearly half of the back had to be pried off.

They worked with a rug over the safe to deaden noise and that scarcely helped. At length the

books and the papers were all out on the grass and Wheeler, with his arm twisted until it was nearly breaking, was trying to pull open the drawers. The cash box was already out and Gleason was breaking it open with Wheeler's cautious eye on him.

"There ain't nothing in the cash box," said Haley, peering over Gleason's shoulder.

"It must be in the compartments," said Wheeler. "There should be at least three grand. How much did you figure it would come to, Red?"

It didn't matter how much Red Gleason had figured it would come to. Apart from a spool of Scotch tape, a few paper fasteners, and thick dust in the corners, there was nothing in the compartments. Wheeler stood glaring down at the safe as if he wanted to kick it across the field.

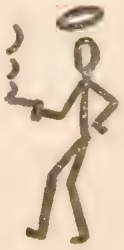
"It must have been more than they wanted to risk leaving," he muttered. "They probably took it home with them."

They had hoped to return to the city during the night, but it was now dawn. While they were held up by traffic lights near South Fairfield a state trooper came out into the road, glanced at his notebook and then at their license plate.

"Give me your driver's license," he said, "you're wanted in connection with an accident outside Northbridge."

"We haven't been near Northbridge, officer," Wheeler expostulated. "We've been playing cards with some friends in Hanford."

"Probably a mistake," said the trooper, "young fellow in an old car was picked up dying. All he could tell us was *your* license number." He nodded affably. "Better come along to the station and clear it up, boys," he said. "You see, we've been on the lookout for that car all night. He was treasurer to a firm called Perry's. Seems he was making off with the week-end cash on hand instead of locking it in the safe. Over three thousand dollars was in a suitcase and thrown out into the ditch."



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the prisoner's base

by . . . Kathleen Norris

Lin was at odds with the Law, and his fear was great. But even the cruelest shadow may have a lining noonday bright.

FORD LOOKED so savage as he came in that Dina did not dare say anything to him, much less mention what was really on her mind. Instead she put dinner on the table—the one o'clock dinner of sausage cakes and hot biscuits, sweet potatoes and stewed tomatoes, apple jelly and fig pudding. Ford liked hearty, hot, greasy food on these chilly spring noons; sometimes he would eat three or four doughnuts while he was waiting, and fall upon his meal with his appetite apparently unaffected.

Today he did not have to wait; Dina was ready for him. She sat down opposite him, eating little herself but watching keenly to see that he had plenty of butter and that the cream and sugar were handily placed for him.

Ford Huddleston was warden of the prison whose shadow lay across Dina's dining table, and her kitchen and her bedroom. Its great brick walls rose above their lives like barriers between them and all the rest of the world. At their meals they talked about little else than the prison, and at

For two generations the novels of Kathleen Norris have remained so consistently on the best-seller lists that no succession of titles, however glowingly referred to, could add a cubit to her popularity. So we won't attempt to list her many triumphs here—only to point out that in PRISONER'S BASE *she has marshalled her talents in such a way that she has achieved in the mystery-story field—and not for the first time—a veritable miracle of characterization.*

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other times they talked hardly at all.

"How's that Mexican girl?" Dina asked.

"Got her in a jacket."

"Ah, poor thing. More coffee, Ford?"

"I don't know why you always ask me that. I always take it, don't I?"

Dina said nothing as she poured the smoking amber fluid into his big cup. She had talked only to half-crazed Lily Cash, her convict washwoman, that morning; she would have been glad of some little interest or distraction in a fresh conversation. But Ida Snow, the wife of Ford's assistant, had gone to visit her folks in Cleveland, and there were no other women near. Larkin Flat, the town, was two miles away.

"Oh, I had a letter from California," Dina presently said. She said it deliberately, bravely, but with a fast-beating heart.

"I suppose you got to tell me Chester is okay," the man sneered, wiping a walrus mustache after a long draught of coffee. "Head of his class in kindergarten and getting on fine. All right, I know it."

"Lin's brother Thomas is coming East as far as Chicago," the woman said. "He and Het are driving. He said he'd bring Chester and leave him here for a month, if you're willing."

"What's the big idea taking him out of school?"

"Oh, this wouldn't be until vacation, Ford!" Dina was so eager that her color fluctuated painfully, and the thin hand on the table trembled. "This would not be for 'most two months!" she said.

"Well, no use getting excited about it until the time comes."

"I don't know, Ford. It's April now, and those California schools close in June."

Ford Huddleston scowled, staring away into space. He finished picking his teeth and took out his pipe. Dina rose and got him matches and an old leather bag of tobacco. She sat down again, anxious and eager, her eyes glued to his face.

"No," he said suddenly. "I don't want him here! I'm thinking of you. I don't propose to have my wife forgetting everything else but a kid of five. When you had him you hadn't any use for me."

"That's not true, Ford," she pleaded mildly. "But he was only a baby then, he wasn't four. And the understand—the understanding was," Dina stammered, made bold by desperation, "that he was to be with us."

"You mean before we were married?"

"Don't you remember, at Cousin Julia's? 'Member saying that he'd be just like your own boy?"

"Yep . . . Well, fellers say funny things when they're after a woman."

"But he's been in California seven months now, Ford, and that's an awful long time in a little boy's life."

"They're good to him, ain't they?"

"Well, I guess they are. But I never knew Lin's folks. I guess his brother Tom's kind enough. He's a doctor, and he don't live at the ranch with the old lady. But since he and his wife are willing to bring Chester along with their children he must be kinder goodhearted."

Dina stopped; her voice sank to a note of wheedling. "He won't be any bother to you now, Ford," she said. "He's getting to be a big feller. If I had him here for a month seems as if I could go on. He—"

"Seems as if you could go on?" the man echoed. "What you talking about? What are you going to do if you *don't* go on? You women can talk more like fools than anything I ever saw! What more do you want than you got? Your husband run off and left you, didn't he?"

"He might of come back, Ford. He was killed in a log jam. That wasn't his fault."

"He wouldn'ter come back! His kind don't. He was through, all right. He'd had enough of his own kid whining and crying around, I don't know why I should put up with it! His folks said they'd take the baby—"

"Because you wrote 'em, Ford! You wrote 'em a year ago. I never would of! I never had had him away from me even for one night till you and I were married. I never thought I'd have to give him up. When you and I first began going together—"

Dina stopped and assumed a good-humored smile. When she spoke again it was lightly. "Anyway, if I could have him for July this year," she said, "I'd send him back to Lin's folks in August without saying a word. Just for July—that's all I ask."

The man—he was a large, gross man whose two days' growth of heavy black beard, added to the effect of the straggling mustache and thin disordered hair, made him look unkempt—was watching her thoughtfully as he chewed on his empty pipe. He was in shirt sleeves and vest; his big figure bulged shapelessly at the belt. His small eyes were narrowed into a suspicious smile.

"Better leave him where he is," he said comfortably.

"But don't you remember, Ford," Dina said patiently, in desperate courage, as he fell into self-satisfied musing, "the Sunday we fixed it all up that we were going to get married, that you and I walked past that corner house, back in Somersville, and you says, 'Wouldn't you and your kid like a home like that?' Won't you do it for Chester's sake? Don't you remember that, Ford,

when I was sick and couldn't go on teaching?"

His small eyes moved over her ruminatively. Again he worked his tongue to clean his teeth.

"Nope," he said flatly. "All I know is, we gave the kid a fair chance. It didn't work. When his grandma wrote from California I happened to open the letter, and I wrote her. She said she'd gladly take him. I don't know what more you want."

"Yes, but I don't even know if he's well or not, Ford! This letter this morning is only the second I've had."

"Listen," the man said. "One man walked out on you because you were always sniveling and whining. You look out you don't find yourself looking for a job again!"

He got up and walked into the adjoining bedroom. Dina could hear the bed creak as he flung himself down upon it. In another few seconds his heavy deep snoring sounded throughout the cheaply built house.

It was a one-storey house, one of a row of five. Two of them were empty; a third was the Snows', temporarily deserted now; a fourth occupied by bachelor assistant wardens; and the fifth, the largest and the corner building, was the Huddlestons'. To all five the prison walls supplied a back fence, and from all five the great rise of the northwest wall shut away the late afternoon sun.

Two miles from the prison the little prairie town of Larkin Flat lay open and level, crossed by railroad lines, boasting only a few two-storey buildings, only a few trees. The town, forlorn as it was, however, was a haven of coziness and comfort compared to the prison that was reached by a bare stark ribbon of highway across the prairie. There was no green at all here; there was nothing here but the harsh squareness of unrelenting cement and brick, of barred windows, of clanking doorways within doorways, of cold sanitary smells of carbolic and antiseptics and hideous warm smells of cheap food, bodies, defective plumbing.

Dina was not an imaginative woman. Her years were but twenty-nine to her husband's forty-eight; her type had been, and in many ways still was, girlish, simple, confiding, uncritical.

But she wondered sometimes how it all had happened. How had she happened to marry Ford? Even sick, penniless and with little Chester to care for, it must have been a strangely blind hour that saw her promising herself to the big, blustering, conceited man.

Nothing good had ever come of the Huddleston blood. And yet Ford had seemed to be making an effort to be worthy of a wife; he had stopped drinking,

he had been wonderful to little Chess . . .

Then the prison appointment had come. What had Ford ever done in his forty-five years except hang about drinking places, gamble, brag of his political influence? Why, quite suddenly, had this last boast been made good and he been appointed warden at Larkin Flat Prison? Ford, with powers of everything short of life and death in his hands! Dina and he had been married on the strength of the new job and had come together to this hideous place more than two years ago.

One hundred and fourteen men in his power now, and the possibilities of graft and abuse and favoritism and bribery infinite! He could drink all he liked now, and still he would be obeyed. Nobody could talk back to Ford in these days.

Dina roused herself from musing, began the usual clearing away. She stacked the dishes neatly in the sink, darkened the dining room just as Cousin Julia always darkened hers after a meal; set about dishwashing and dinner preparations methodically.

It was just then that the telephone rang sharply, and at the same moment the voice of the prison siren rose in a great shriek and swept above the house like a shrill howling wind, bringing Dina's heart into her mouth with terror, and bringing Ford forth from the bedroom still half asleep, his face florid where it had touched the pillow, his fingers fumbling with vest buttons. He snatched the telephone.

"Who is it?" he shouted more than once. "How long ago? What the hell have you fellers been about that you leave it wide open?

"It's Pool!" Ford said to his wife, hastily concluding only the essential part of his redressing. "Five fellers' time was up this morning, and we let 'em go. Luke says they think he slid out when they did."

"He's got a good chance then," Dina contributed, half to herself. She couldn't help it; when they escaped she always hoped they'd get away. "Murderer, Ford?"

"Killed a feller that got fresh with his sister. I don't know what it was—"

Ford rushed away, and Dina followed him to the door and stood there, staring out at a world so bare and level that even a cottontail could hardly expect to escape across it in any direction, especially with the siren sweeping it with a wild alarm of warning, and the townsfolk running to their doorways two miles away to share the excitement of a getaway.

"I wonder where he is. They'll kill him if he's a lifer," Dina thought, her heart hammering. "Oh, poor fellow, what could he possibly do? Where can he go?

They'll get him, and Ford'll talk to him that awful, awful way he does."

She went back to her kitchen; knelt down. She was a praying woman, though there was small encouragement for trust in God here. Now she very simply asked her Father not to let Ford talk to the man the way he always did.

Standing up, opening her eyes, a little dizzy, she saw a mud-spattered, dirty man in stripes standing in the kitchen door.

Dina was not frightened for herself; men in stripes were a commonplace with her. But a swift protective pity for him tore at her heart.

"For God's sake go give yourself up while there's time," she said in a sharp, furious whisper.

The man was staring at her. "Say . . ." he stammered. "What do you know! *Say!*"

She looked at him now, and her knees grew weak, and her mouth filled with salt water. Dina sank slowly into a chair, never moving her eyes from his.

"Oh, my God in heaven!" she whispered.

He had a cup of water at her lips. She swallowed some with an effort that brought tears to her eyes. Her look did not leave him.

"Say, what a break *this* is!" he said. "Dina!"

"Lin," her lips said without sound. She sat staring at him weakly, broken.

"What are you doin' here?"

"I am—I am Huddleston's wife."

"Oh, my Godfrey!" Lin said. She remembered the old oath. "I bin here two months," he added. "Funny I never saw you."

"I don't go over much. I'm in the women's end a good deal, but Ford don't like me to see too much of the men."

"You ain't *married* to Huddleston, Dina?"

"For 'most three years now."

"You haven't had much of a break with your husbands, I'll say that," the man said after a pause.

The siren was still now; the world very still. A chicken looked in the kitchen door, cluked reproachfully, went away. Dina panted; she was very pale.

"You got a divorce?" the man said.

"There isn't any divorce if you're a Catholic," she reminded him, speaking vaguely, almost apathetically. "We thought you were killed, Lin, when the jam broke. The boys came back and said you and Old Cap Cutter and three of the Portygees were washed right down the river. They found the bodies and there was a funeral. Then I took Chester and went to Cousin Julia's for a spell."

"I didn't go back," he said. "I wanted to get out. I was sick and Chester was sick all the time. I've paid for it, Dina. I've never had a happy moment since. I've

wanted to go back and tell you I knew how mean I'd been. I always thought I'd make good and then come get you."

"How'd you come to murder anyone, Lin? Ford says it was someone insulted your sister. And when'd you take the name Pool?"

"Curt Pool," he said. "I never done it, Dina."

"They all say that."

"But this was a frame-up. Dina, where's the kid?"

"Out in California with your mother!"

"No?" the man said. And into his sallow, haggard young face a strange light suddenly came. "Is that right? Did you take him there? She's got a nice little prune ranch up in the Santa Cruz range. It's just about a living for her. Is he there?"

"Ford sent him. He can't stand Chester. When we were married he said he'd always give him a home—Lin," Dina said, interrupting herself in sudden agitation as the siren began to whine again high up in the sun-washed air of the chill spring afternoon, "you've got to get out of this and I don't know how I can help you! They'll shoot you down like a dog if you put up any fight, and there isn't a place between here and Larkin Flat that'd hide a cat. What'd you do it for? You can't get away with it!"

"I gotter have clothes," the man said.

"There isn't a thing. He'd kill me if I helped you, because there was three escapes and that Baretti thing last month, and he's scared to death of his job!" the woman said. "He isn't going to let anyone else get away. Oh, why did you do it?"

"Listen, Dina. If I can get to Larkin Flat for the five train—it's after three now—I'm all right. I'll get West to Ma, and she'll hide me away until things blow over. Huddleston ain't anxious for any more breaks to be reported from Larkin Flat. Get me an overcoat anyway, can't you?"

He came nearer, and she remembered the look in his eyes and the tones of his voice. "Look," he said. "Whether they get me or not, here's something I want to know. Will you forgive me, Dina? If I get away I'm going to do different now. Honest I am. I'm going out to Ma's and run her place for her, and try to give the kid a break. Will you just say that you aren't mad at me?"

She looked at him, trembling, June color flooded up under her fine skin and a young light softened her tired eyes.

"I've always loved you, Lin," she said thickly, very low. "You weren't ever unkind to me. You were sick, and Chester was sick —Oh, my God, that's Ford!"

She broke off in a terrified whisper and went quickly to the

dining room, closing the kitchen door behind her. Ford had thundered up the front steps to the barren little porch; three or four guards were with him.

"See anything of him?" he shouted.

"Run this way?" Dina called back.

"Sure he did. The boys seen him. He was hiding in the storehouse, he'd tunneled into it somehow. They knew he was in there for an hour. They didn't think he'd dare make a break for it. But he run out, half an hour back, when the siren began! Circle the house, boys, and look through the Snow place," Ford directed in an excited shout.

"He may be in one of them empty houses!" one of the men called.

"Oh, where is he? Where could he get to?" Dina's frantic thoughts ran. "The flour barrel —under those quilts in the closet —up in the attic—there's not room to stand up there, but he might have swung himself up through the trapdoor and be lying flat. He's fighting for his life now, sure enough! I guess you're wishing you'd let well enough alone now, Lin."

"Didn't see nobody?" her husband demanded, following her into the kitchen now as the men forged to and fro like hounds on a scent, their voices echoing up and down Warden's Row. The siren was silent again, and all other noises seemed magnified.

"I was out in the kitchen, Ford. You know how awful that siren makes me feel!"

"He's a tough bozo, all right!" Ford was searching the closets, the laundry; he leaped down the cellar stairs. "He dropped his gun as he ran," he said. "So we're not going to have any trouble with that baby!"

Dina stood still on the kitchen doorstep, with the great walls of the prison rising to shut off her vision a hundred feet away. The *zoom* of the mail plane sounded far overhead; that meant three o'clock. It would come to earth in twenty minutes at Ridley, nine miles away. The free, graceful plane flashed white against a whiter sky; twinkled in the cold spring light.

Dina's eyes followed it westward until the harsh roof line of the prison shut it from sight. Oh, to be in it, to be up in the clean cold air, to be anywhere but here!

At any second they might find Lin now; at some one of these ghastly seconds they would find him. They would drag him in, helpless. Lin would be hustled to the jail again, to such limited mercies as Luke and Ford chose to extend. They had hosed Baretti until he was half conscious and then flung him into "solitary" until he raved and frothed and died. But no, there was no use being sorry for the men in the prison, there was nothing to be

done about it, it was just that way!

The hunt went on. Men ran across the little back yards of the Row, jumped fences, looked down from upstairs windows, called back and forth. Ford ran to the prison, came hurrying home again. Dina thought that she never had seen him in a worst state of excitement and anger.

"If he don't show up pretty soon I'll get the dogs from Plaquette!" he said, jerking the telephone dial about with his fat forefinger.

"How'd he make the break, Ford?" asked Dina.

She was sure, by this time, that Lin had gotten himself into the attic. Impossible to think how he had managed it in the few minutes between her seeing Ford and his violent entry into the kitchen, for a dozen men were scouring the place now, and every garage and chicken house and porch corner had been turned out. But somehow he had managed to hide himself.

She attempted to engage Ford in conversation as often as she could; wherever he was, time was an important consideration to Lin.

"He must have got into the storehouse when the men went out this morning," Ford said. "We let five fellers go today; they made the noon train from Larkin Flat, and he probably fooled himself he could get away with 'em. But nix. Luke checked 'em—they don't put anything over on him! This feller Pool—he's a lifer—got himself into the storehouse through a window in the back that's been blocked up for years."

Ford's eyes were searching the open space before the Row as he and Dina stood on the front porch, his voice absent-minded and lowered to little more than a growl. "He shoved the boxes around and squeezed in. Maybe he thought he could live in there for a while," he said.

"Luke didn't miss him until the boys come back from lunch and then he asked Harry, and they scouted around a little—I was over here—and they seen his legs through the front window of the storehouse. But he run through and jumped out the back window—they didn't know it was there—and by the time they got Red and Tex he was running this way.

"He got behind this row of houses all right, and Tex come for me—I was just back in my office—and I says, 'No rush, boys, a flea couldn't get away cross these flats, and we'll do this thing right,' so we went down and checked 'em all over and locked 'em up. I don't want no more trouble here," the man ended. "That business last month didn't do me any good. When we get hold of Mr. Curt Pool

he'll wish he hadn't been quite so tricky."

Dina saw the three o'clock train pull itself like a shining little snake free of the village. Two miles away, every inch of the road open to the merciless prison inspection, and Conway, the stationmaster, vigilantly on the lookout. No, no hope there! She had talked to Lin ten minutes ago. No man could make two miles in that time—no man in prison stripes, with his sinister history written in his haggard face and terrified eyes.

"I should think he'd kill himself," Dina said, wondering if he had, in one of the empty rooms of the two untenanted houses. Was that going to be the end of Lin Forrest, the lean, good-natured boy who had bought her a strawberry sundae at Witting's so many years ago, and had walked home with her, and told her that she was the cutest-looking girl he had ever seen?

Poor Lin, who was just getting a start in the lumber mill when Chester had arrived, and times had gone hard, and Lin's health had given way. He hadn't been able to eat or to sleep; he had grown depressed and cross; "getting you and the kid into a mess like this!"

And then had come the terrible wet day of his leaving her, and a week later the log jam and the sullen rush of the swollen river, and six men—Lin among them, swept away in a jumble of raging, coffee-colored water and churning logs—logs leaping into the air, logs standing on end, logs hammered together as they had gone roaring down toward the rapids.

Weeks afterward, their clothing torn and washed away and their faces obliterated, some of the men's bodies had been found. There had been a funeral, with Mrs. Lin Forrest as one of four widows. To no one, least of all to terrified little penniless Dina, had it occurred to doubt the finality of that hour.

"Got him!" Luke, the guard Dina especially disliked, shouted at this moment. He charged past the Huddlestons, husband and wife, and thundered across the porch to the kitchen. Dina and Ford followed him. "He's up here in your attic, Mis' Huddleston!" Luke shouted.

"He can't be," Dina said. "I was right here in my kitchen all the time the siren was blowing!"

"He's here, all right!" the man repeated. "Looka the—looka that trap door!"

"Ford!" Dina caught at her husband's arm. "Don't let the boys shoot at him! You've got him—he can't get away. If you kill him there'll be an investigation, and after all that trouble last month that won't do you any good. Robertson wrote you he wasn't any too well pleased—"

"Get out of my way!" Ford shouted, jumping up on the gas stove, extending big arms toward the trap door. But he had heard her.

"Don't shoot, boys," he said as the other guards gathered in an excited group in the kitchen. "He ain't got a gun. If he gets funny with his fists knock him out, but we don't want the governor over here again. You picked up his gun, didn't you, Tex?"

"Red did," Tex answered in a soft thin wheeze oddly at variance with his gorillalike person. "He didn't have nothin' in his hands when he run."

Ford mounted the ladder someone had brought and placed beneath the trap-door opening. With that strange unimaginative courage that had before this surprised Dina in him he thrust his head up into the dusty darkness above.

"We got you, Pool!" he called. "Come on down here. You can't get away with it!"

"Maybe you have and maybe you haven't, Huddleston!" Lin's voice sounded from somewhere under the low raw pine shingles. There was a crash of glass. "You ain't any more anxious to have trouble here than I am!" Lin added.

Ford withdrew a dusty head, yelled incoherently to his men. "He's out on the roof—he's got away. Get out there, some of you. Get a move on! Hold onto this ladder, Tex—"

They all rushed out to the front of the house again, Dina following. She ran down past the forlorn straggle of the garden, looked up at the roof. The guards were swarming along the Row from porch to porch now, yelling at the man's figure that was running fleetly from roof to roof above their heads.

The five cottages stood close together. The man ran up the slope of one roof as if it were a little hill, ran down the corresponding slope and lightly jumped the five-foot space between the gutters to repeat the performance on the next roof.

He was swifter than the clumsy tumble and scramble of the guards below. He reached the empty end house, sprang from its roof to that of the garage, bounded to the earth and was clearly to be seen running like a deer across the slight rise of the bare field beyond.

Lost, of course, but how he ran! Lin had been a famous runner years ago, and he had a hundred-yard start on his pursuers now. Dina thought of the plane that had moved so steadily westward half an hour earlier. Ah, if it had been against the cold white afternoon sky now, and had swooped down toward that straining figure, what an escape there might have been!

But there was no plane. There

was only the open stubbled prairie bleak before the first breath of spring, and filled with mudholes where the men had dug rocks or played their cheerful ball games. Twice she saw Lin fall; both times he was up and away like a hare, but both times the panting, shouting, cursing following of the guards was closer.

"Don't shoot!" Ford had bellowed after them.

Dina went back into the kitchen and knelt down and covered her face with her hands. No hope, no chance for him. No God to pray to! Lin to be soused with icy water, punched and beaten, flung into the bitter exile of "solitary." And herself presently to listen to Ford gloating upon the capture of his prey, and to serve corned beef and cabbage for supper.

"You couldn't do anything about this, God, and I'm not going to bother asking You," Dina said.

The hunt was over now; they were bringing Lin back. She could hear their voices; she looked from her kitchen window and saw them crossing the field, the muddy figure walking uprightly enough, but tightly gripped by the big hands of Charlie and Red.

"No, Lin, you couldn't make it; you never had a chance," she said.

The siren again; three short blasts. Silence, and then three more. That meant that the fugitive was captured. That screamed to all the farms and villages within reach of its hideous voice that there was no more danger from the runaway; wives could turn their children loose in dooryards again, and small boys go off to pastures to bring in cows. He was caught. Warden Huddleston was a darned fine warden in spite of that cruelty story last month. A lifer got loose today at noon and they landed him before four o'clock . . .

Five o'clock, and Ford due home for dinner any minute. Lin was lucky if he had been flung, cold and muddy and supperless and aching from blows, upon the black verminous floor of the solitary cell. But it took the boys a lot of time to wreak their vengeance upon anyone who broke jail.

They liked excitement, they adored a hunt, but none of them enjoyed the necessity of sounding the siren that notified all the surrounding country that another man had evaded their vigilance and was making a desperate rush for freedom. The "caught" siren was always sounded with especial fervor and repeated with what, to Dina at least, was nauseating gusto.

The telephone rang. The sheriff and the station agent and the authorities generally wanted to know if Pool had been captured. Yes, they got him, Dina answer-

ed patiently. They had him fifteen minutes ago—half an hour ago. Mr. Huddleston was still over at the prison but they probably weren't answering that telephone now; it was after five, and there wouldn't be anyone in the office.

She began to wish ferverishly that Ford would come home, ending the episode, ending the horrible suspense of not knowing what was happening to Lin.

"I guess I'll stop praying," Dina thought.

A sudden new doubt assailed her. With Lin living—living beaten and soaked with cold water and flung into solitary confinement, it was true, and subsisting on water and dry bread, yet still alive—what was her status in Ford Huddleston's house? What could Ford do to her if he ever discovered that she was deceiving him, that she had not been genuinely a widow at the time she and Ford had married?

"He couldn't put me into jail, I should think. It wasn't my fault. The priest married Lin and me and read prayers over Lin's body with the rest of the boys that were drowned when the jam broke. Maybe I ought to get away. I've got 'most two hundred dollars saved. I always thought I'd use it for Chester's education, but it'd get me someplace Ford couldn't find me. But if he found out he'd be meaner'n ever to Lin . . .

It was almost six o'clock; the table was set and the supper ready when Ford's heavy foot sounded on the porch. The spring night had closed down dark and chilly, and Dina had lighted a fire in the black iron "airtight stove." Her kitchen was brightly lighted and warm, but the passage was dark, and at first she could only see that a man was with Ford. He was bringing someone home for supper.

The man followed him to the kitchen door; a lean man, with a rather white face and gentle sad blue eyes, and long clever hands. A man whose brown hair was wetly brushed, and who was clothed in worn garments obviously never selected to fit his thin breadth and his inches. Lin.

Dina stood staring, the color ebbing from her face. She was too completely stupefied to disguise her amazement, but fortunately Ford, who was in a boisterous, jovial mood, saw nothing.

"Got enough dinner for two hungry fellers?" he asked.

"I got plenty, I guess," Dina said in a third attempt to speak.

"This is Tom Mack, the feller we were chasing today."

"I thought it was Pool you were chasing."

"Well, we did too!" Ford said with a forced, hearty laugh. "Come in, Mack," he said. "Set down. Yes," Ford expanded it

with relish as his shapeless, gross body itself expanded comfortably in a big chair, "we certainly got things balled up today. Mack's time was up this morning, and he left the pen with the others."

"Oh, 'sat so?" Dina said politely, setting another place. Her face was pale and her hands were shaking, but she did not look at Lin, and Ford never really looked at anyone. "Where's—where's Pool?" she asked.

"Well," Ford said, taking his knife from his pocket and paring his nails. "He's got away. He must be hiding out round here someplace, in some barn or silo, and I ain't going to make any fuss about him. We'll get him. The sheriff'll have to know. I'll stop in and talk it over with him tonight, but I don't want the boys to blow the siren again. It does nothing but frighten the women. We'll get him, all right."

"Mrs. Huddleston looks like she'd like to know how I got back into rocks, after I was let out," the visitor now said. It was Lin's remembered voice, and now that he had abandoned the hideous filthy striped prison apparel the men called "rocks" he was indeed Lin again, only older and thinner. He was the man she had loved so eagerly years ago, after her lonesome and bewildered girlhood—indeed, the man she loved still.

"Pool stole his clothes while he was washing up down at the canal," Ford explained. "Get a move on, Dina," he remonstrated. "Can't we eat? I've got to get Mack, here, to the seventen."

"I was discharged with four other fellers this morning," Lin explained, falling upon the corned beef with vigor. "Warden, here, drove 'em over to the noon train, but I walked. I been shut up for a year, and it felt good to me to walk where I liked again."

Dina moved her trusting, weary eyes to his face questioningly.

"I got a year for being mixed in with a gambling racket," he said.

"You weren't a lifer, then?" the woman asked mildly.

"No, but Pool was. And Pool worked a break while we was busy getting the boys discharged this morning," Ford said. "He must have hid in them cotton woods where the smaller bushes are, down at the canal back of the grain elevator, and when Mack, here, stopped to wash himself and clean up he stole Mack's clothes. Mack had to get back into the rocks or go naked, and he come back here to explain to me and borrow some clothes."

Dina looked from Lin to Ford.

Ford gulped down masses of hot meat smeared with mustard, forkloads of steaming cabbage, wiped his dripping mustache. "Then what'd you do, that you

got caught in the storehouse, Mack?" he asked.

"Well, I followed Red in there when he went in for some beans. I wanted to talk to him," Lin explained. "But the minute he saw the rocks he went out again, and the door slammed and shut me in. Red and Tex and some of those others stood guard, and they sent for you, Mr. Huddleton. I was afraid they'd shoot, and I wasn't sure they'd seen me, so I lay low. I didn't want to take any chances.

"Well, after a while I saw the back window, and I thought I could sneak round here and explain, but the boys seen me and it was all up. Maybe," Lin added, with an apologetic smile for the warden, "maybe I shouldn't of been so scared. But I ran without thinking what I was doing—"

"You should of yelled that you wasn't Pool," Ford said genially. "But you boys get so you can't look no one in the face!"

"I know. But when you've been in the pen awhile you sorter lose your guts," Lin apologized simply. And as Ford's bullhead was lowered over a second mammoth helping of food he winked at Dina.

"Where you goin' now, Mack?"

"I'm going West. I've got a wife and kid—well, my wife ain't there just now," Lin said. "But I'm expectin' her to join me," he added.

"'Sat right? Know you was sent up?"

"Does she know I was in the pen? Yes, she does," Lin answered after a moment. He split open a fifth biscuit. "Home cooking surely does taste good, Mrs. Huddleston," he said.

"I guess it doesn't make any difference to her," Dina said. "If she thought you were dead she might of married someone else, but as long as you were living she'd know she was your wife."

"In that case—if she thought a man was dead, and married again—a woman would just have to leave a letter for the second man, explaining that she was no bigamist," Lin said. "And get out. He wouldn't have no claim on her."

Ford was not listening. "Ain't there something else?" he demanded.

"There's a blackberry roll. Wait a minute." Dina carried plates into the kitchen, came back with the smoking pudding and the graniteware coffee pot.

The men finished their dessert hastily. It was quarter to seven now, and the dirt road to town was filled with mudholes. Ford went around the corner to get the car; Lin and Dina had a moment together on the porch.

"How'd you get him to bring you to supper?" the woman asked in a quick, furtive undertone.

"Oh, the boys had turned the hose on me and they were get-

ting pretty rough. I guess he felt a little ashamed, and nervous maybe, on account of Baretti passing out on him last month. He don't want any more trouble."

"Why'd you do it, Lin? You're smarter than he is. You didn't have to hide in the storehouse and make that getaway. All you had to do was walk into the office and say, 'I'm Mack.' "

Ford had driven the muddy car to the floor of the garden twenty paces away; Lin was leaving.

"All right!" Ford yelled.

"Say this over to yourself until you understand it, Dee," Lin said hastily, shaking hands in farewell. She remembered the little name of their early days together, and the little shack at the lumber camp, and the smell of wood smoke and wet redwoods, and her heart began to dance in a way it had long forgotten.

"Say this over till you get it," said Lin. "Pool is a friend of mine and a good feller; I've known him seven years. He done what he did—well, never mind that, but there was reason! He killed a skunk, and his wife's dying of tuberculosis, and there's children. He's got a hide-out up in the Canadian woods where they'll never find him. He's got a name fixed and a place and everything. And his brother-in-law is the mail pilot—get that? The mail pilot that went down at Ridley at three-twenty, see?

"I had to keep things going until three-twenty. After that I knew he'd be all right. He had four hours to walk nine miles. We swapped clothes at the canal, and I spattered my face with mud. I took care they wouldn't recognize me—"

"Come on!" shouted Ford.

Lin ran lightly down the steps, waved a hand from the car.

"See you again someday, Mrs. Huddleston!"

"See you again!" Dina echoed. Her heart whispering, "Soon."

She leaned against the doorpost and looked up at the wheeling stars in the dark blue sky of spring. There was a new moon and she thought it seemed friendly, as if it was smiling down at the tired little woman in the shabby kitchen apron in the shadow of the big prison. When she brought her eyes to earth again she felt as if she had been praying—really praying, not just making herself say the words of prayers.

The lights of the town twinkled on the prairie, two miles away. Dina could see the train pull in, a caterpillar of little lights, could see it draw away again, toward the Far West.

Lin was on his way West now, on his way to the mountains and the redwoods, and the frosty mornings green and shadowy, and the long summer days scent-

ed with tarweed and prunes. Chester was out there, little slender, anxious, affectionate Chester in his belted sweater and stubby little shoes, waiting for "Mom."

"Gee, it is certainly one sweet night tonight. I guess we are going to have spring early after all!" Dina said aloud. "I guess it does you good to pray even when you've kinder stopped for a while," she said.

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the blue rajah diamond

by . . . Sax Rohmer

Never had the City of London received a more awesome gift than the Blue Rajah. Nor Moris Klaw a knottier crime problem.

INSPECTOR GRIMSBY, of Scotland Yard, called upon me one evening, looking extremely grim. "Perhaps I should have phoned you," he said. "But the matter was so important I knew you'd excuse my dropping in unexpectedly like this. Did you know that a committee of business executives has been formed to buy, and present to the Crown on behalf of the City of London, the big Indian diamond?"

I nodded, and pushed a box of cigarettes toward him.

"Well," he continued, thoughtfully selecting one, "they are meeting in Moorgate Street tomorrow morning to complete the deal and formally take over the stone. Sir Michael Cayley, the Lord Mayor, will be present, and he's received a letter, which has been passed on to me."

I waited in silence while he fumbled for his pocket-case.

"Here you are," he said, and quietly handed the communication to me. It read:

When the ever inscrutable Dr. Fu Manchu's versatile and famed creator drew up a balance sheet for that diabolical oriental's signature he must also have had Moris Klaw in mind. For only by damning himself roundly could Dr. Manchu have openly acknowledged quite another aspect of Sax Rohmer's writing genius, the creation of a character in all respects the opposite of sinister but with enough mystery in his makeup to delight and enthrall mystery lovers from New York to London to Sidney. Again we bring you the one and only, the wholly unsurpassed curio-dealer sleuth of Wapping Street in the East End.

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To the Right Honorable, the
Lord Mayor of London
My Lord: Take care that the Blue Rajah is not stolen on Wednesday the thirteenth day of this month. Do not lose sight of it for one moment.
Your Lordship's obedient servant,
Moris Klaw.

"You see, said Grimsby, "the date he mentions is tomorrow, when the diamond is to be brought to Moorgate Street, Naturally, Sir Michael communicated with the Yard, and as I know a great deal about Moris Klaw, I was given the task of looking into the matter. Incidentally, I was at the Mansion House this morning."

"I suppose Sir Michael regards this note with suspicion?" I inquired.

"Well, he's not naive enough to suppose that anybody who thought of stealing the diamond would drop him a line warning him of the fact in advance! But he'd never even heard of Moris Klaw until I explained about him. Klaw won't lift his little finger when *I* ask him. As for his daughter, she behaves as though she were looking at a cinema cop comedian when she looks at me."

"You've been to Wapping, then?" I asked.

"Yes, this afternoon. But I couldn't get to see Klaw. When I called at the curio shop his daughter insisted that he was not at home."

"I suppose every precaution will be taken?" I said.

Grimsby nodded. "Tomorrow morning I and the other C. I. D. men are to accompany the party to the safe-deposit vaults to collect the diamond. You can be sure that it will be well-guarded every moment after that."

"Who's going to take it from the vault?"

"Sir John Carron, representing the India office and Mr. Mark Anderson, the well-known jewelry expert, Sir Michael Cayley, representing the City. Also Mr. Gautami Chinje representing the Gaekwar of Nizam. I was wondering"—Grimsby surveyed the glowing ash of his cigarette—"if you could find time to run down to Wapping yourself, so we'll have some idea what Klaw is hinting at."

"Sorry, Grimsby," I said. "I would do it with pleasure, but unfortunately, my evening is fully taken up. Personally, it appears to me that Moris Klaw's warning was a timely one. You seem to be watching the stone pretty closely."

"Like a cat watches a mouse!" he assured me. "If any one steals the Blue Rajah tomorrow, he'll be the cleverest crook in London!"

Basinghall House, Moorgate Street, is built around a court-

yard. You enter under an archway and immediately find offices before you to right and left. The concern of Anderson & Son is on the left as you enter, and from the window of the chief's sanctum you can look down into the courtyard.

At a quarter to eleven on Wednesday morning Mr. Anderson—one of the city alderman—entered his own private office from the corridor. He was accompanied by Sir John Carron, Mr. Gautami Chinje and Inspector Grimsby. These three important individuals had come with him from the safe deposit vaults, but it was Mr. Anderson himself who had possession of the case containing the diamond.

In the office, already awaiting the party, were Sir Michael Cayley, the Lord Mayor, Mr. Morrison Dell of the Goldsmiths and Silversmiths Company, Sir Vernon Rankin, ex-Lord Mayor, Mr. Werner of the great engineering firm of that name, and Mr. Anderson, Jr.

These constituted the entire presentation committee duly appointed by the City of London—excluding, of course, Sir John Carron of the India office, Mr. Chinje representing the vendor of the jewel, and Mr. Grimsby, representing New Scotland Yard.

"We are all present, gentlemen," said Mr. Anderson. "But before we proceed to the business which brings us here, we will go into the inner room where we can be assured of complete privacy."

Accordingly the party of eight passed through the doorway, and Mr. Anderson, Sr., entering last, relocked the door behind him, Inspector Grimsby remained alone in the private office.

Eight oak chairs and a long oak table bearing a pewter inkwell, two pens and a blotting pad, a large oriental rug, and a framed photograph bearing the legend: "Jagersfontein Diamond Workings, South Africa," immediately impressed the eye, and gave to the room an aspect of stateliness.

As soon as the company was seated, Mr. Anderson addressed them from the head of the table.

"Gentlemen, our business this morning can be briefly dealt with. I have here"—he produced a leather case, opened it, and placed it on the table before him—"the diamond known as the Blue Rajah.

"I shall not enter upon a long digression in summarizing its history. It appeared in the year sixteen hundred and eighty. It is supposed to have been found in the Kollur Mine, on the Kostna. It had a weight of some two hundred and fifty carats in the rough, but it was reduced to one hundred and thirty carats in the cutting. It has been successively owned by Nadir Shah, Princess de Lamballe, the Sultan

Abdul Hamid, Mr. Simon Rabstein of New York, and finally, the Gaekwar of Nizam."

He paused, raising the diamond from its receptacle, and turning it about in the sunlight which streamed in through the room's one window. The jewel seemed for an instant to glow in its own light, with flamespears of dazzling radiance.

"In fact, gentlemen," he concluded, "the Blue Rajah is a most appropriate offering for the City of London to make to the Crown."

And immediately thereafter the diamond was passed from hand to hand.

The formal business of turning over the stone to the committee was then transacted. A check of impressive dimensions was placed in the pocket-case of Mr. Gautami Chenje, autographs were affixed to two formidable documents; and the Blue Rajah became the property of the loyal City of London.

Sir John tenderly laid the diamond in its case. At that moment exactly a blood-curdling scream arose in the courtyard below.

"Good Lord!" cried Mr. Werner. "What is that?"

There was a crowded rush to the window, with those who were the slowest to act peering over the heads and shoulders of the first to seek the cause of the dreadful cries, which continued in a choking yet shrill crescendo.

"It's someone in the archway!" exclaimed Sir Vernon Rankin, excitedly. "Can any of you see him?"

No one could, though every neck was craned vigorously.

"I can't seem to get the window open," cried Mr. Anderson. "The catch must have jammed."

Abruptly the cries ceased. By now people were running about below, and the blue uniform of a city constable appeared suddenly among the group in the archway.

"I'll run down and see what has happened," said Mr. Chinje, stepping to the door which opened on the corridor. He tugged, then gave a startled exclamation. "Why, it's locked!"

Young Mr. Anderson turned to him with a smile. "Both doors are locked, Mr. Chinje," he said. "For the time being we're virtually prisoners."

"Give me the case," said his father, selecting the key of the door communicating with his private office. "There's no occasion for further delay."

The Lord Mayor turned from the window, through which he was still peering, and stepped to the table.

"Mr. Anderson!"

"Yes?" said the jeweler, glancing back.

"Have you the diamond?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then who has it?" demanded the Lord Mayor.

It was a question which no one could answer. But the case was empty!

Mr. Anderson replaced the keys in his pocket, his ruddy face grown pale. Sir Michael Cayley, the empty case in his hand, stood staring across the room like a man suddenly struck mute.

At last he forced himself to speak. "Gentlemen," he said, "since it is physically impossible for the diamond to have left this room, we must institute a search for it immediately. First, is it by any chance upon the floor?"

A brief examination showed that it was not.

"Then," said Sir Michael, "a painful conclusion is unavoidable. It is upon someone's person!"

An angry murmur arose.

Mr. Anderson raised his hand. "Gentlemen, Sir Michael has made no more than a simple statement of fact." And, his face remaining very pale, he said quietly, "It might be wise if we admitted the detective. His experience may enable him to succeed where we have failed."

The suggestion met with no opposition, and the communicating door was opened. Mr. Anderson without leaving the room, called to Inspector Grimsby. The inspector entered and the door was instantly relocked.

"Inspector," said Mr. Anderson, "the diamond is missing!"

Grimsby's eyes opened widely in amazement. "Are you sure, sir?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot doubt it," Mr. Anderson assured him.

"When did you last see it?"

"At the moment when that uproar broke out below," said Mr. Dell.

"I see," murmured Grimsby, thoughtfully. "You all rushed to the window, I imagine?"

"Exactly."

"Leaving the diamond on the table?"

"Yes," confirmed Mr. Anderson.

"That's when it was stolen!" Grimsby said, with quiet conviction.

"Very possibly, Inspector," said the Lord Mayor. "But who took it and where did he conceal it?"

"I'm afraid you must permit yourselves to be searched gentlemen. I am used to that sort of thing. Do you all agree to being searched by me?"

There were no protests, and Grimsby not only searched the garments of the eight, but passed his hands all over their persons, even making them open their mouths and tapping at their teeth with a lead pencil! But they took it in good grace.

"I did some I.D.B. work in South Africa," he explained.

"It's wonderful where a clever man can hide a diamond."

But no diamond was found!

It was a fairly large room, some thirty feet square, containing eight oak chairs and a long oak table. There was a rug on the floor and the walls were completely bare, save for the framed photograph previously mentioned.

The one window was closed and securely fastened. The door opening on the corridor was double locked and save when it had been opened to admit Grimsby, the door communicating with the next office had also been locked throughout the course of the meeting.

There was no fireplace. Ventilation was provided for by a small, square ventilator above the corridor door.

Having convinced himself that the diamond was not concealed on the person of any one present, Inspector Grimsby took only two or three minutes to satisfy himself that it was not hidden elsewhere in the room.

"Gentlemen," he said slowly, "the Blue Rajah is not in this room!"

The Lord Mayor glared. He was a director of the company with which the diamond was insured, and his integrity was naturally somewhat critically involved.

"My good man," he said, "it's not humanly possible for anything—*anything*, mind you—to have gone out of this room since we entered it!"

"I agree with you, sir," said Grimsby. "But nevertheless I'll stake my reputation that the diamond isn't anywhere inside these four walls! Although my search of you gentlemen was a mere formality, I assure you it was thorough. I know my business. As to the room itself, it's as bare as a drawing-board. You can take it as a certainty that the diamond is gone!"

"Then we are wasting precious time," exclaimed Sir Michael.

Grimsby's jaw shot out doggedly. "If you could give me a hint as to where to begin, sir," he said, "you can rest assured that I would not waste another second."

"Hang it all, that's your business."

"I know it is, sir. But I'm only a fallible policeman, after all. We won't gain anything by losing our tempers."

Sir Michael softened. Inspector Grimsby is not a man who can be browbeaten, and his confidence in his eventual triumph seldom wavers.

"Quite right, Inspector," Sir Michael said. "I recognize your difficulties. But do you realize what this loss means? It reflects upon all of us."

For a moment there was silence, while each of the eight

exchanged anxious glances. Suddenly the Lord Mayor exclaimed, "The man Klaw! He knows something of this matter! Mr. Grimsby—"

Grimsby held up his hand, and nodded. "With your permission, gentlemen," he said, "I will try to get in touch with Moris Klaw immediately."

"Good," said Mr. Anderson; "and meanwhile, while we await the result of your efforts, Inspector, I suggest that we have lunch in my office. It may be inconvenient for some of these gentlemen, but for my own part I am determined to remain on the premises until we have news of the whereabouts of the diamond."

The proposal was carried unanimously, and in this way, then, I was drawn quite unexpectedly into the case. For Grimsby hastened to phone me, begging me to urge the retiring Moris Klaw to venture audaciously forth from his Wapping haunt, and to journey to Moorgate Street.

Fortunately I was in my rooms, and willing enough, despite my previous pretense of reluctance, to again enjoy an opportunity of studying Klaw at work.

Since evidently he had felt convinced that an attempt would be made this morning, I did not doubt that he would be at home. He was in when I rang him and arranged to meet him at Mr. Anderson's office.

"I warned that ridiculously stubborn Lord Mayor," came his rumbling voice over the wire, "that he must not let the diamond out of his sight. He ignored me, to his own sorrow. Ring him up immediately and tell him I'll be there."

Without hesitation I followed his instructions, and then hurried out and flagged a cab. Klaw and I arrived at Basinghall House almost simultaneously. Our cabs drew up one behind the other and except for the presence of Inspector Grimsby at the entrance, there was nothing to show that an unprecedentedly mysterious robbery had been committed there less than an hour before.

As I descended Grimsby strode to the curb and opened the door of the other cab. He offered his hand to the beautiful girl at Klaw's side, according her a deference that I thought just a little forced.

Isis Klaw was attired as usual in garments which set off her beauty to the best possible advantage. But her father afforded a contrast that would have made any self-respecting style arbiter shudder with despair.

Behind the lovely vision of his daughter he appeared enveloped in his cape-surmounted coat, his yellow-bearded face crowned by a flat-topped bowler

hat of Victorian pattern—and quite possibly of early Victorian manufacture.

Moris Klaw turned aside, raising his hat. "Good morning, Mr. Searles! Good morning, Mr. Grimsby! Suppose we walk on as far as the courtyard. I should like to have you tell me all the facts before I interview the others, who will be, of course, prejudiced by their misfortune."

We passed on—and many an admiring glance followed the slender figure of Isis beneath the archway. Hemmed in by offices, a certain quietude prevailed in the courtyard.

"It is a chilly morning," said Moris Klaw. "But this is as good a place as any to stop and talk."

Accordingly Grimsby related the known facts of the case, and it seemed to me that he more often addressed his story to the girl than to her father.

"Yes, yes," growled Klaw when he had finished. "I'm chiefly interested in the scream which drew them to the window. Just what occasioned it?"

"That's the mystery!" said Grimsby. "I wish I had rushed down to the street immediately. I might have learned something of vital importance. As it is, we're completely in the dark. The clerks and porters and other people who came flocking to the scene found no one there who knew anything about it."

"The screamer had vanished, eh?"

"Completely! I can't help thinking it was a ruse—though what anybody hoped to gain by it isn't clear."

"Not clear, you say?" rumbled Moris Klaw. "You have a rigidly circumscribed mentality, my friend!"

Grimsby flushed. "Of course," he said hurriedly. "I can see that it served to divert the attention of those who ought to have been guarding the diamond. But as both the doors and the window were locked, how did it help to get the stone out of the office?"

Moris Klaw tugged reflectively at his scanty beard. "We shall see," he said.

We entered the elevator and went up to the office of Anderson & Son. The Presentation Committee was awaiting Moris Klaw, but had not anticipated a visit from a pretty woman. They were prepared to adopt toward the man who had claimed to possess foreknowledge of the robbery a guarded attitude of suspicion, but it was amusing to observe the change of front when Isis appeared.

Moris Klaw singled out the Lord Mayor and the owner of the office with unerring instinct. "Good morning, Mr. Anderson," he said. "Good morning, Sir Michael. Good morning, gentlemen!"

"This is Mr. Moris Klaw,"

said Grimsby, "and Miss Klaw —Mr. Searles."

Mr. Anderson hastened to place chairs for us. Following a short interval, Sir Michael Cayley cleared his throat.

"We are indebted to you, Mr. Klaw," he began, "for your kindness in coming here. But in view of your note to me—"

Moris Klaw raised his hand. "That is easily explained," he said. "I have a library, you see, of records dealing with such historic gems. To show you that I have made a rather exhaustive study of these matters I will tell you that the diamond called the Blue Rajah was discovered on the morning of April the thirteenth, in the Kollur Mine, and stolen the same evening! The year was Sixteen hundred and eighty."

"What is your authority for the exact date, Mr. Klaw?" asked Anderson with interest. "And just how do you know that the diamond was stolen on the day of its discovery?"

"Fact, Mr. Anderson, is my authority," was the rumbling reply, "and I can tell you more. The diamond is the birth-stone of the month of April, and this diamond was itself born on the thirteenth of that month. To illustrate how its history is associated with April, I shall only tell you of the beautiful and unhappy Marie de Lamballe. This great diamond was presented to her on the ninth of April, a year after the French Revolution, and taken from her exactly two years later, after her return from England, and only six months before her fair head was stuck upon a pike and held up to the queen's window!"

Moris Klaw paused impressively, waving his long hands in the air. "I could recount to you," he resumed, "many such incidents in the history of the Blue Rajah—and all took place within a week of its birthday! What day is today?"

"Why, it's the thirteenth of April!" said Sir Michael Cayley with a start.

"The thirteenth of April," rumbled Moris Klaw. "For many years the diamond has been too closely guarded for any new incident to occur. But when I learned that it was to be brought here today and how many hands would touch it, how many eyes look upon it, I knew that there was a very great danger of history repeating itself."

Moris Klaw paused, then went on: "I should now like to view the room from which the theft took place. There is no need for any of you gentlemen to accompany me."

"You would wish us to remain here?" asked Mr. Anderson, glancing at the others.

"My daughter will accompany me—also Mr. Searles and Mr. Grimsby."

"I hope, Mr. Klaw," said Sir Michael Cayley, "that you will not hesitate to send me an account of your fee and expenditures."

"Thank you, Sir Michael. I shall not hesitate," Moris Klaw promised.

We entered the small room from which the Blue Rajah had been spirited away.

Grimsby was patently grateful for Klaw's cooperation. "It's beyond me," he said, "how the stone was taken from the room. With this door shut, the window fastened, and the other door securely double locked, as it always is, the place is practically a strongbox."

"A box—yes," agreed Klaw, "and exceedingly stuffy."

"There's no ventilation," said Grimsby. "That square aperture over the door is intended for ventilation. But as there's no corresponding aperture over the window or elsewhere, it serves no purpose. Anyway, it only opens on the corridor."

"Did you search every member of the committee quite thoroughly?" asked Klaw.

"Certainly," Grimsby assured him. "But I didn't expect to find it."

"And you wouldn't have," Klaw said. "I shall sit here at this table for one hour with my mind completely open and receptive. I shall think of nothing.

"That is a great art, actually—to think of nothing. Few people can do it. Try it for yourself, and you will find that thinking of trying *not to think* is the nearest you will get to it! I shall expose my mind—a sensitive blank—to the thought impressions created here by mental emotion.

"I shall recapture the committee members' consternation at finding the Blue Rajah missing. But that is unavoidable. And if I am lucky, a stronger, more vital emotion will come through to me—the fear of the thief at the critical moment of his crime! It should be a cogent and forceful thought—keener and therefore stronger in survival capacity—because it is a thought of danger, and also of gain."

He stood up, removing his caped coat and revealing the shabby tweed suit which he wore beneath it. A big French knot of black silk looked grotesquely out of place beneath his face with its edging of toneless beard.

"Isis," he said, "lay my cloak carefully upon that chair by the window. I will sit there."

Isis laid the coat upon the chair, completely covering it—and Moris Klaw sat down.

"Return in an hour, gentlemen. Isis, see that no disturbing sound is allowed within or without. The committee members may go home. None of them has the diamond."

"And the other gentlemen?"

asked Grimsby. "They'll be anxious to get about their business, too. There's Sir John Carron from the India Office and Mr. Gautami Chinje—the gaekwar's representative."

"Of course— I understand," mused Moris Klaw. "They will naturally be anxious to know the result of my inquiries as soon as possible. Mr. Anderson may remain; he can represent the city, and Mr. Chinje had better remain, too, to represent the gaekwar—the vendor. Also Sir John Carron. Kindly make those arrangements, Mr. Grimsby, and see that nothing further disturbs me."

We left him to his meditations, and returned to the outer office.

Sir John Carron expressed himself willing to remain. "If I may use your telephone for a moment, Mr. Anderson," he said, "I can put off an engagement."

Mr. Chinje had no other engagement, and Mr. Anderson's duties would have detained him in any event.

There was some general but subdued conversation before the rest of the party left. But finally Sir John, Chinje, Grimsby, Isis Klaw, and myself found ourselves in a waiting-room on the opposite side of the corridor, provided with refreshments, while the considerate and deeply anxious Andersons piled the table with magazines for our entertainment.

It was a curious interlude which I shall always remember.

Sir John Carron—a tall, bronzed, military-looking man with an engaging smile—surveyed Isis Klaw through his monocle with undisguised admiration.

She bore this scrutiny with remarkable composure, and presently the admiring baronet and Mr. Chinje began a discussion of recent developments in India.

Grimsby, with a look of somber apprehension in his stare which he could not quite conceal, smoked for the most part in silence.

At the expiration of the hour specified, Isis Klaw rose and walked across to Mr. Anderson's office. The latter was glancing from his watch to the clock, his ruddy face—typically that of a lowland Scot—a shade paler than was its wont. He made no attempt to follow her.

Isis knocked on the inner door, opened it and entered. Sir John Carron was watching with intense interest, while Mr. Chinje met my eye and smiled a little skeptically.

Presently Moris Klaw came out with his caped coat on and carrying his bowler hat in his hand. "Gentlemen," he said, "I have secured a mental impression. It is somewhat foggy, owing to the strength of the

many other thought impressions which were present in the room. But I have identified the thief!"

A startled gasp came from somewhere immediately behind me. I turned abruptly. Mr. Anderson and his son stood at my elbow, and directly behind them were Mr. Chinje, Grimsby, and Sir John Carron.

"Who just exclaimed in astonishment?" rumbled Moris Klaw, peering through his pince-nez.

"Not I," said Sir John, staring about him.

We all, in turn, denied having uttered the sound.

"Then there is in this office a ghost," declared Klaw, "or a liar!"

"That is pretty strong language, Mr. Klaw," began Mr. Anderson, with some heat.

Moris Klaw raised his hand, while his daughter's dark eyes coolly surveyed each of us in turn.

"Please be patient," implored the rumbling voice. "Anger is a misuse of the emotions. There are eight persons here, and someone exclaimed in astonishment—perhaps in fear. Since you each deny uttering a sound, someone in this room is quite obviously a ghost or a liar."

"Your logic is irrefutable," admitted Mr. Anderson, glancing from face to face. "Go on, Mr. Klaw."

As he was speaking I had taken pains to examine Grimsby who was apparently quite witless with wonder. Both the Andersons were clearly embarrassed and angry. Isis Klaw was scornfully triumphant. Klaw himself was, as usual, completely in command of the situation.

Sir John Carron looked ill at ease. Mr. Chinje appeared to have changed his opinion of the eccentric investigator, and was now studying him with the calm detachment of the cultured Oriental.

"I shall now somewhat amuse you," said Moris Klaw. "I shall tell you exactly what our mysterious thief was thinking of at the psychological instant."

He paused, then went on with quiet persuasiveness, "He was thinking of two things. One was a very pretty, very foolish young lady. The other was incredibly ludicrous. He was thinking of throwing peanuts into a parrot's cage!"

There are speeches so entirely unexpected that their effect is unappreciable until some little time has elapsed. The speech of Moris Klaw was that kind.

For some moments no one seemed to grasp exactly what he had said, simple though his words had been. Then it was borne home to us—the utter grotesqueness of the declaration. I doubt if I have ever seen eight men more amazed.

"Mr. Klaw—" began Sir John Carron.

"One moment, Sir John," interrupted Klaw. "I suggest you all remain here for a moment. I shall return."

While we stared like so many vacant-minded idiots he shuffled from the office with his awkward gait.

During his brief absence no one spoke. We were undoubtedly restrained by the presence of Isis Klaw, who was smiling at us with a sort of pitying scorn for our stupidity.

After a moment Moris Klaw returned. "Let me see," he rumbled reflectively. "Have you, Sir John or Mr. Chinje, a specimen of the handwriting of the Gaekwar of Nizam?"

Chinje and Sir John exchanged startled glances.

"At the office—possibly," replied Sir John.

"I have my instructions, signed by him," said Mr. Chinje. "But not here."

"At your hotel, then?"

"Yes," replied Chinje shortly. He gave me the impression that he resented Moris Klaw's insistence as that of a fool and an incompetent meddler with affairs of great importance.

"Then, gentlemen," said Klaw, "we must adjourn to examine that signature."

"Really," the younger Mr. Anderson burst out, "I must protest against such an irrelevant request. You will pardon me, Mr. Klaw. I believe you to be wholly sincere in your efforts on our behalf. But such an expedition can be no more than a wild goose chase! What can the gaekwar's signature possibly have to do with the theft of the diamond?"

"I will tell you, my unjustifiably impatient friend," said Moris Klaw slowly. "The Blue Rajah is not on these premises. It disappeared before I came. If we are ever to recover it you will put on your hat and accompany me to examine the signature to Mr. Chinje's instructions."

"I must add my protest to Mr. Anderson's," remarked Chinje. "This is mere waste of time."

"Mr. Klaw," cried Anderson, interrupting excitedly. "You are jesting with men who are in a truly desperate position! I ask you now, directly. Do you know who stole the Blue Rajah and where it is?"

"I can only reply," rumbled Moris Klaw, "that I suspect the identity of the thief. I am doubtful how it was stolen, but when I have examined the gaekwar's signature I may know where it is!"

His reply had a tone of finality quite unanswerable. His attitude was that of a stone wall, and he had, in addition, something of the rugged strength of such a wall—commanding instant respect.

We all left the office and went down in the elevator to the hall.

"Two cabs will be needed," said Moris Klaw; and two cabs were promptly summoned. Sir John Carron, the Andersons, and Moris Klaw entered the first, while Isis Klaw, Grimsby, Chinje, and I crowded ourselves into the second.

"The Hotel Astoria," directed Chinje.

Throughout the drive to the hotel Isis chatted with Grimsby, to his great delight. Mr. Chinje contented himself with monosyllabic replies to my occasional observations, and seemed still to be disgusted with the manner in which the inquiry was being conducted.

In a matter of moments we presently came to the rooms occupied by the gaekwar's representative on the fourth floor of the hotel.

At the door Mr. Chinje hastily got out his key and opened the door. To my great surprise, he entered first. To my even greater surprise, Moris Klaw rapidly followed him in! The rest of us flocked behind, possessed with a sense of something ominous impending to which we could give no name.

One object, as I entered the little living room, struck me with a sensation almost of physical shock. It was a large, empty parrot cage standing alone on a center table!

It seemed to me that Chinje dashed forward in a vain attempt to conceal the cage before Moris Klaw entered. I saw, as one sees confused, unexpected figures in a dream, an attractive, fair-haired girl in the room.

Then Chinje had leaped to an inner door—and was gone!

"Quick!" cried Klaw in a loud voice. "He mustn't get away!"

He brushed the girl aside with a sweep of his arm, and hurled himself violently against the locked door.

"Mr. Grimsby! Mr. Searles! I need your help!" he cried. "Isis, watch out for that foolish girl! She may be dangerous."

The inner meaning of the scene was a mystery to us all. But the urgency of Moris Klaw's instructions brooked no denial. With an infuriated scream the girl had thrown herself upon him, but Isis, exhibiting unsuspected strength, twisted her arm sharply, and forced her back toward the wall.

Then Sir John Carron joined Klaw at the door, and they applied their combined weights to the task of forcing it open.

The second time they put their shoulders to it there was a sound of tearing woodwork and with the third heave it flew open, almost precipitating them both into the room beyond.

Hard on the din of the opening rang the crack of a pistol-shot, and we drew back in consternation as a wisp of smoke came floating out.

"It's as I feared," said Moris Klaw hoarsely. "We're too late!"

At his words, with a leap like that of a wild thing, the girl broke from Isis and stumbled past us into the room beyond, her face ashen.

We followed and looked upon a pitiful scene. Gautami Chinje lay dead upon the floor, a revolver still clasped between his nerveless fingers and his right temple bright with blood. Beside him knelt the girl, plucking with both hands at her lower lip, her eyes staring insanely at the distorted features of the young Hindu.

"Dearest," she kept whispering in a despairing monotone. "My dearest, what is the matter? I have the diamond. I have it in my bag. What is it, my dearest—"

We got her away at last.

"He had only been in London six months," Moris Klaw said in a confidential tone as we left the hotel, "and, you see, she adored him. She helped him to steal. It is quite amazing—the fascination some Hindus are able to exercise when they court a woman."

So ended the case of the Blue Rajah robbery, one of the briefest in the chronicles of Moris Klaw. The great diamond we found in the girl's handbag, wrapped in a curious little rubber covering apparently made to fit it precisely.

"You see," explained Moris Klaw later to his wondering audience, "this girl—I have yet to find out who she is—was apparently married to Mr. Chinje. Who would have been the losers by the robbery? The insurance company, if I am not mistaken. For the gaekwar, through his representative, Chinje, had the diamond insured while it remained his property and the committee took over the insurance when it became their property in England.

"It is still their property, but in any case the gaekwar would have got his check. He gets it now; it is in Chinje's pocket-case. The city would have lost their Blue Rajah, and the insurance company would have paid the city for the loss!

"The next office along the corridor from Mr. Anderson's is the Central London Electric Lighting Company. Many consumers call there. Mrs. Chinje was not suspected of any felonious purpose when she was seen in that corridor—and she was seen by a clerk and by an engineer.

"After my mental image had told me that a pretty young lady dominated the thief's thoughts at the moment of his theft I went to inquire, as you may recall, if a young lady had been seen near the office.

"From the first my suspicions were with Chinje. Human emotions have each an individual note, wholly distinct, like the notes of a piano, though they are only audible to the trained mind. Both Isis and myself detected in Chinje the note of *fear*. We arranged, then, for him to remain.

"My talk of examining the gaekwar's writings was naturally a ruse. It was Chinje's apartment and the fair lady I expected to find there that I was anxious to examine.

"Then, in spite of the fact that he remains amazingly cool, I see that he suspects me, and I have to hold him fast. If he could have gotten to his room ahead of me and hidden the parrot cage, where would our evidence have been? Indeed, had I not been able to secure the astral negative, there would have been no evidence at all.

"There was a third accomplice—he who screamed in the courtyard. But I fear he has so cleverly vanished we shall never know his name.

"How was it done, and why did the accomplice scream?"

Moris Klaw paused, and looked at each of us in turn. We awaited his next words in tense silence.

"He screamed because Chinje had looked out from the window, and had given him a signal. The signal meant: 'The Blue Rajah has been placed upon the table—cry out now in simulated terror.'

"The man below obeyed, and the committee, like foolish sheep flocked to the window. But our deft-handed conjurer, Chinje was at the table, and the diamond disappeared in the little rubber purse held ready. Mrs. Chinje, with her large handbag open, was waiting just outside the door in the corridor, like some new kind of wicket-keeper. Chinje simply tossed the diamond through the little square ventilator! Surprising, yes—but not too difficult.

"He had been practicing the feat for weeks—ever since he knew that the committee would meet in that room. He had been tossing peanuts into the square opening of a parrot cage placed at the same height from the floor as the ventilator over Mr. Anderson's doorway!

"He had practiced until he could do it dozens of times without missing. He had nerves like piano-wires. But he was a deadly anxious man, and he knew that a woman cannot catch!

"But she caught it nevertheless—or if she dropped it, no one saw her pick it up." Moris Klaw smiled then for the first time. "Gentlemen, I am very thirsty. I believe I heard Mr. Anderson make some cooling speech about a bottle of wine!"

chained

by . . . John Jakes

Outwardly the two youths seemed very much alike. But between crime and the law was a gulf too cruelly wide for pity to span.

THE TWO boys, each hardly looking twenty, crossed Adams Street, leaning against the bite of the wind. The iron pillars supporting the bulk of the elevated tracks which blotted out most of the light from Wabash Avenue formed a mad sort of slalom for large vans, passenger cars and yellow taxis, whose horns hooted incessantly. What little thin lemon October sun there was drifted only weakly down.

The pair pressed close against one another, their steps timed in perfect togetherness, and so smoothly executed that only an occasional man or woman in the jostling crowds passing them from the opposite direction gave them an interested, suddenly curious second glance.

The boy on the outside, wearing Marine green, had an almost grotesquely huge holster of rich burnished leather strapped to his slender hip. The boy on the inside wore a pair of scuffed brown loafers, tight levis faded almost white and a leather jacket, up

In a tragic psychological sense the saddest words of tongue or pen are not "It might have been," but "If only I could have known." It is very easy to hate a lawbreaker. But contrary emotions are so powerfully evoked in this story as to confirm what we have always suspected—that John Jakes is a mystery writer with a profound insight into seldom-explored depths of experience. The boy in the leather jacket could so easily be—your neighbor's youngest son.

from the open collar of which spread the points of a worn flannel shirt. With stiff, mechanical precision, the pair cut left sharply at the entrance to the electric railway station.

They passed through the lobby, up stairs past the gaudy paper quilt of a news-stand, and out onto the platform on the east side of the tracks. Seedy pigeons with bloated chests picked their way between chunks of grimy peanut and crumpled candy wrappers. The platform was fairly crowded with a pair of young blonde girls with expensive luggage, several workers in frayed denim jackets, and a group of sailors—the usual afternoon shoppers.

"Here she comes," said the boy in the leather jacket, flatly, without emotion or a stir of life showing around his eyes.

The Marine glanced to the south, where the train of three green cars slid toward them along the track with a blat of its air horn. The boys stood so close their shoulders touched. Eyes from the crowd rested on them, curiously. They both stared stolidly into space, like statues, painfully forcing themselves out of motion and time into frigid, unseeing remoteness.

The platform began to vibrate. The green cars slid in flush with the platform's edge and a conductor began to chant, "Train for Great Lakes, Waukegan, Milwaukee," repeating it.

With a tiny nod or inclination of his head the boy in Marine uniform stepped forward. The response of the boy in the jacket was a second delayed as they moved from beneath the platform roof, with the crowd, into the car vestibule. Random yellow sunshine falling from a dusty October sky shone and gleamed for a brief second upon the dull-lustered links of the handcuffs that chained them together.

They settled into seats, the ones in the car closest to the vestibule. Corporal Dale Perry, nineteen, again grew woodenly self-conscious about the awkward way their arms rested between them—his left, Thurm's right. Perry's eyes rested for a second on the way his hand lay beside that of Thurm, and he thought: *They look the same, out of the same mold, and yet I'll drink a beer in Waukegan tonight, and Thurm* . . . He stopped himself. Only an hour's ride to Great Lakes. Then his job would be over and Thurm would be the property of the officers, to do with as they pleased.

Thurm had been apprehended in a cafeteria in downtown Chicago, and all Perry had to do was shepherd him back within the walls of law. But the regulations—the iron cord between them, so everyone could see—made Perry feel humiliated and ashamed. His pleasant face became suffused with a faint blush,

and he reached a packet of Camels from his blouse pocket with a free hand.

"Cigarette, Thurm?"

"Thanks," Thurm accepted, with a shy grin. He had a narrow face, and curly dark hair that spilled down over his forehead. *Why the hell can't he sneer, or be obscene, or something?* Perry thought furiously. Thurm merely waited calmly with the cigarette between his lips for Perry to bring out his lighter. Then Thurm threw back his head, inhaled deeply, and slowly said, "Corporal?"

"What?"

"What do you reckon they'll do to me?"

"That's not for me to—I don't know."

"Throw me out? Dishonorable, I mean?"

"I guess so, eventually." *Shut up,* thought Perry, *I'm only doing my job. If you get tough I'll have to use the .45 on you, but that doesn't mean I'd want to.*

Disturbed, Perry gazed out the opposite window with his head averted as the train gained speed, swiftly flicking off the miles on the overhead track between factories and slum apartments. In the distance, the spire of the Palmolive Building swept past, muted in the pale afternoon.

"Will they tell my folks?" Thurm spoke with soft intensity. "I mean, if they throw me out?"

"How old are you?" Perry asked, knowing, and it hurt.

"Se'nteen. My folks gave me their permission for me to enlist."

"Then they'll probably be informed." Perry attempted to say it coldly, but knew he had not pulled it off. He avoided looking at Thurm.

The conductor approached for tickets, and as his punch snicked through the oblong of orange cardboard, Perry, without looking, felt curious eyes burning at the handcuffs. *Get away from here, you ugly son,* Perry thought wildly, *or—*

The conductor moved into the vestibule, the next car. Perry swallowed. *What's the matter with me? All right, so I know what he's done. But I can't help it if I feel like I'm dragging an animal, not a human being. Why did he have to do it in the first place?* he thought with impotent agony.

"I don't want to go back," Thurm said with sudden misery.

A woman in the seat ahead shifted, listening. Perry grew red again. Fine, Perry, he railed at himself. They could make you jump on the outside—and it was right a good part of the time—but he wished they could fill his insides with cement, or something.

Thurm stared from the window, eyes squinted against the afternoon light. The conductor

entered the car again and announced Wilson Avenue.

Perry's cheeks grew suddenly flaming. *What if . . . shut up, Perry. No, but what if I let him go?* Instantly the disciplined part of his mind reacted, but the other, emotional half of his brain rushed headlong on, plotting.

Covertly Perry glanced at Thurm, and Thurm averted his eyes, but not before Perry had noticed the tiniest gleam of hate in Thurm's eyes, not at Perry perhaps, for Thurm had been staring at the links of the handcuffs between their wrists; hate of what he was going back to.

Perry recoiled. Then: *I can't blame him.* Suddenly, in an instant's flick of the wheels, he had it. *Yes, let him go. Make it look . . .*

He opened his mouth to speak, but for some reason his brain conjured up a picture of his father with a yard rule, the family whipping stick, and then the face of the Puerto Rican drill master, cursing him on the midnight hike and calling him "You people!" and telling him to stay in step, or else—Perry's tongue got so thick he felt it would gag him, and in dumb pain he looked at Thurm and thought: *Go on, ask me. That's all it takes. But I can't say it. I just can't say it. You've got to make it easier for me. Can't you see that?*

As the train slid away from the Wilson Avenue platform, Thurm licked his lips. "This the last stop? I never kin remember."

Perry, for some reason, looked strangled. He blurted out, "One more. Howard Street. Last one before Great Lakes."

The name, and its associations, made Thurm's mind work in rapid, fumbling haste. *I won't go back,* he thought. *I just won't.*

Thurm closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool glass of the window, remembering it all in a haze that wouldn't go away, like a bad dream, remembering the letter from Ellie and how pretty she was, the night of the dance at Hopper's barn, the night before he went away.

He saw her face, felt her . . . *Oh, don't, you're only making it worse,* he thought to himself. Why did it have to come, that letter? Five weeks was all he'd been in, and Ellie—she couldn't even write very good—told him on paper she was in trouble. It all seemed pretty mixed up now, so mixed up it made him want to cry, or be sick. He didn't want Ellie to find him. Oh, he'd gotten out, on a fake pass: but when he got into Chicago on the train, he knew his uniform would mark him. So there wasn't anything to do but go into that gas station, with the stick wedged in his pocket, and take forty-three dollars.

He remembered it all now as the train whirred smoothly north,

back, back, to a lock-up, and a discharge. He remembered the movies he went to, and the comic books he bought and read while he sat up all night in the Union Depot, and the peep show machine on State Street where the girl slipped off her . . . oh, Ellie! I got you in trouble, and now this, and the folks got so mad when I wanted to go away anyhow, and . . .

As if he had awakened, as he had done so many mornings of his life, into the raw acid winter air that cut around the farmhouse in February, he stopped his memories. The buildings raced by in a blur. He felt a sudden surge. Maybe—maybe this corporal, if he told him what happened, Ellie and all . . . maybe the corporal would—Thurm's head sank down a notch. Gyrene? Oh, God, Thurm, you're soft in the head. What do they teach you about being a good Marine? Not yellow-belly soft. No, that wouldn't . . .

His breath came short. There might be a way, if he kept cool and refused to think of the risks. He cleared his throat. "Corporal."

"What?"

"I got to go to the john."

Perry hesitated. "Okay." Together they hefted themselves from the seat, and stepped into the tiny lavatory behind their seat next to the vestibule door.

Thurm's heart slugged. He didn't know if he'd timed it right, only . . . He glanced at Perry.

Perry said, "Well, I guess I'll have to open these cuffs for a minute . . ." and fished in his pants pocket for a tiny key, all the while blocking the door firmly with his broad back. Thurm undid the buckle of his levis belt while Perry inserted the key, gave it a turn.

Thurm felt the train begin to slow beneath his feet.

He brought a knee into Perry's groin, and used the free end of the handcuffs to slash the corporal's eyes. Perry grunted sharply and Thurm's stomach gave a wrench. The train lessened speed, yet for Thurm the sights before his eyes began to blur fast like a movie running too rapidly.

Why couldn't he get the corporal out of the way? It was the last stop! Frantically he grabbed the corporal around the throat, giving him another knee, and he choked hard. Perry fought back, but a third knee weakened him and slid him along the narrow lavatory wall.

Thurm tore the door open, belt buckle rattling, and shoved people he never saw to the side. Oh God, what perfect, what wonderful timing! He'd elbowed the conductor to one side and leaped for the platform before the train quite stopped. The

momentum threw him forward and through blurred eyes he saw a tiny white enameled sign across a gate reading, EXIT—PASSENGERS ONLY.

Why was that woman in the way? He kicked her, got her throat. Mustn't hurt her. He only had to get away, before they found out about Ellie, or his running. The woman's shrieks hurt his ears, and he continued to shake her by the throat, wondering why he could not get her wedged out from the tiny exit.

PERRY clutched at his throat and fought his way off the train, snagging at the button lip of the holster. The automatic filled his fist. He called for Thurm to stop, but Thurm had gone crazy, strangling the woman who blocked the gate to the stairs leading down to the street. In a tenth of a second Thurm had thrown the screaming woman at last to the side, and Perry felt his arm, trained, come up without thought, and yet a segment of his brain cried out and wailed: *It didn't have to be this way. Why couldn't you say it? Why couldn't you ask me?*

The arm rose, higher, higher, arching, straining forward, like a machined thing and Perry watched in horror for he could not stop it, no matter how much one small bit of his mind wanted him to, as the knuckles whitened, and, with the woman out of the way, gasping and panting against an old election poster, the explosion shattered the air and Thurm's head, disappearing over the top step, opened like a ripe red fruit bursting.

Thurm gave a sickening pitch f o r w a r d and disappeared. Around Perry rose a surf of talk. He lowered his arm stiffly to his side, squinting into the sun, guilty and cursing himself for his own nature. They taught you, but how could you know you were always, *always* right, even when . . .

Perry shook his head. He didn't know. Mechanically Perry started forward toward the body as the conductor began asking the other passengers if anyone was hurt.

—Continued from Back Cover

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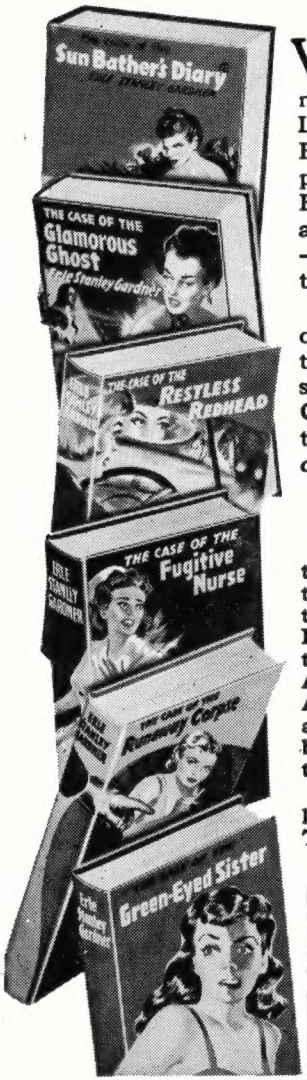
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